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A Tale of South Devon

BY

HAWLEY SMART

AUTHOR OF 'BREEZIE LANGTON' 'THE MASTER OF RATHKELLY' 'LONG ODDS' ETC.

A NEW EDITION

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CHAPTER I

THE DRAGON INN

WHAT induced Joe Mercer to take the old Dragon Inn was a thing that puzzled his friends and acquaintances not a little. Those who knew him best deemed him the last man to throw his money away in foolish speculation, and yet what could have induced him to take a dilapidated roadside inn, from which the custom had departed the last ten years or more? Joe Mercer had come to Exmouth about thirty years before the commencement of this history. He had no apparent command of money to start with; still, whatever business he took in hand throve, and for all his pleasant, good-humoured, somewhat unctuous manner, there were very few who could lay claim to having got the best of Joe Mercer at a bargain, though there were plenty who could tell a different tale. Shortly after his arrival at Exmouth he married a woman a little older than himself, a bold, black-browed virago, who, though attractive, both in appearance and from the possession of a little bit of money, had failed to find a man hardy enough to face the brunt of her vixenish tongue for a lifetime. The command of a little more capital enabled Mercer to further extend his operations, and whatever he turned his hand to, and he was a regular Jack-of-all-trades, Joe Mercer made money at. He had dabbled in pretty nearly everything, but whether it was coal or corn, timber or turnips, he always came out of the speculation somewhat the better for it. He was by this

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time reputed a 'warm man' amongst his friends, but neither he nor his wife was much addicted to show. They lived quietly, and though no one doubted Joe Mercer had money, nobody suspected him of being rich.

Still, what could have made him take the old Dragon Inn? A house with a history certainly, but a house, one would think, of which the history was ended; while, as every one knew, it had been shut up altogether for the last five years. Standing about a mile out of the town, a little off a road, which, running through a rich farming country, led to a large fishing village only, it was not likely to attract much custom. Years ago, when the Dragon was a prosperous house, it was much the fashion amongst the visitors and people of Exmouth to have jaunts and junketings there in the summer-time. Picnics were held there. The big room at the Dragon was just the thing for a dance. It was a pleasant stroll from the town, and it was the fashion to declare that there were no such strawberries-and-cream anywhere as were to be had at the Dragon. The hostess had some renown as a cook, and it was considered amongst the young bloods who frequented the neighbouring town quite the correct thing to dine there occasionally. But after dark, and more especially during the autumn and winter nights, rumour declared that the Dragon entertained very different guests, that instead of modish young gentlemen in top-boots and buckskins and caped riding-coats, it was crowded with black-bearded men in semi-nautical attire, and whose speech was garnished with a profusion of those expletives so much in vogue about the time that Nelson swept the seas. Report said that the horses of the Dragon did a deal more work by night than ever they did on the farm attached to the inn by day, and that the granaries contained more ankers of brandy than sacks of corn.

But all this was a thing of the past. Free trade had pretty well killed smuggling, and so far reduced the profits as to make the game no longer worth the candle. With railways, too, came the facility of travel, and the Exmouth merrymakers went further afield for their revelry. Still, it was, no doubt, mainly the decline of smuggling that produced the decline of the Dragon. The old house

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struggled bravely along for some time under tenant after tenant, these latter mostly endeavouring to get their living out of the land attached to it rather than by the inn itself; indeed, the last landlord of the Dragon had finally decided to shut up the house as an inn, and confine himself solely to farming till his lease should be up.

'It's odd, very odd,' said one of Joe Mercer's intimates, it bangs one altogether. Old Joe and his wife are a managing pair, but they have no experience in the liquor trade. He can't expect to get a living out of that old tumbledown house, and if Crank couldn't make the farm pay it ain't likely that he can. He has done one or two smart specs in corn, no doubt, but that don't teach a man how to grow it, and Joe is over old to learn.' However, the new tenant of the Dragon, in spite of a good-humoured and slightly jocular manner, was an adept at keeping his mouth closed. He would talk freely with any one upon any subject, and was apparently as open and candid a man as you would wish to meet; but, for all that, you never got a word out of him about his own concerns. And though his neighbours were full of inquiry as to what had induced him to take the place, they got no scrap of information from Joe Mercer. He put them off with all sorts of jesting replies. 'It was a nice cheap place; he wanted country air. He was getting too old for business. A bit of farm like that would just serve to amuse him.'

'"Old" Joe,' retorted one of his cronies, 'gammon! you ain't very far past fifty, and you're tough as pin-wire. Why, it'll cost you a mint of money to put the old tumbledown place in repair.' To which Mr. Mercer merely replied, that 'he supposed he should have to wear a bit of money over it.'

It soon became evident that whatever his motive might be in taking the Dragon, he had no intention of spending money over the house. A bar and bar parlour were speedily fitted up, with little regard to ornamentation; a licence to sell wine, beer, and spirits taken out, and that apparently was as much as Joe Mercer thought necessary to do for the public. He furnished as many rooms in the rambling old building as his family required, and, indeed, in respect to bedrooms, seemed to have gone to rather unnecessary

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expense, having two or three to spare; the old signboard was renovated till the victim of St. George shone resplendent in many colours, and then he briefly announced his appearance in the 'public line' in the local papers, and sat himself down to wait for customers.

He had certainly not gone to much expense, being even in that matter of the signboard careful of his outlay; but still, it seemed, his friends were like to prove true prophets, and that in all probability he would never see his money again. The Dragon had now been reopened some months, and Joe Mercer, to all appearance, was still waiting for customers, who seldom came. The few pints of beer and the odd glasses of brandy-and-water that he sold would surely never pay either his rent or his licence; while as for the land, Mr. Mercer seemed to trouble his head very little about that, and certainly no one would be likely to accuse him of high farming. However, to the astonishment of his friends, the landlord of the Dragon seemed quite contented with the present state of things. He declared that business was on the increase, despite there being no visible signs of such being the case; said that to re-establish an inn that had been given up for some years was a slow process, and that it would 'pay right enough in the long run.' Meanwhile, the only noticeable thing was that of the few customers who did frequent the Dragon most of them were strangers to the neighbourhood.

Joe Mercer was blest with only two children; of these, Sam, the elder, had some years since left the paternal nest, and, with his father's assistance, started in business on his own account. When his intimates inquired of Joe what his son was doing, that worthy would reply briefly with an expressive wink, 'Horses'; but Mrs. Mercer, who was more communicative, always proudly described Sam as a 'gentleman on the turf.' Whatever Sam Mercer's exact position might be, when he periodically made his appearance he was always dressed in good clothes, and had apparently plenty of money in his pockets. As for Sarah, more familiarly known as Sally Mercer, she was a good-looking black-browed wench, who had inherited a good bit of her mother's energetic disposition and passionate temper. For the rest she was a vain, ambitious, pleasure-loving young woman,

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who had already made herself rather notorious by the lengths to which she had carried her somewhat numerous flirtations; but with all this, the girl never lost sight of the one great object of her ambition, and in this she was constantly encouraged by her father. Miss Mercer was not satisfied with the companionship of the tradespeople, farmers, cornfactors, &c., amongst whom her lot was cast. She aspired to ascend in the social scale, and knew that the one way she could achieve this was by marriage.

'Don't you throw yourself away, Sal,' her father would say, 'you're a good-looking lass, and won't go to your husband empty-handed. Only marry a gentleman, and I'll see you've brass enough to ruffle it with the best of 'em; remember they are just as much caught by a pretty face as a shopman, and you're better-looking than ever your mother was, and she was a clipper in her day.'

Miss Mercer, upon the whole, approved of the move from Exmouth to the Dragon. It was a much more roomy house than the one they had vacated, and it was no distance from her numerous friends; indeed, as she remarked to herself, it was a very nice distance for her admirer of the evening to see her home. At first she had some thoughts of occasionally officiating in the bar, but after two or three days' experience of the few customers who looked in, she made up her mind, unless more attractive metal turned up, to leave that domain entirely to her mother, and the 'young lady' officially engaged for the post.

This latter damsel had always been hopelessly puzzled by a peculiar clause in her agreement—to wit, a stipulation that she should return to her own home in Exmouth to sleep. Why Mr. Mercer could not find her a bedroom in a house with so much spare room as the Dragon passed her comprehension. The men employed on the farm lived over the stables, and the two country girls who acted as handmaids to Mrs. Mercer slept in a cottage hard by, so that virtually after nine o'clock, except perhaps for a chance traveller, there was nobody in the inn save the family themselves. These arrangements were peculiar, no doubt, but not more so than Joe Mercer's taking the Dragon at all.

'He's a long-headed 'un, is Joe,' remarked one of his

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intimates; 'but he'll muddle all his money away over that there Dragon, mind me if he don't.'

We can most of us reckon among our acquaintances some few whom we rather dread coming across, and his friends, as a rule, dreaded meeting Mr. Tootell. Always a gossip and a busybody, since retiring from business that gentleman had dedicated his leisure to assiduous inquiry into the affairs of his neighbours, and the taking of the Dragon Inn by Joe Mercer was a thing that at once attracted his attention. Mr. Tootell having made his own money in the 'public line,' and having an infinite belief in his own wisdom, considered that no man could know better than himself as to what promised to be a paying property in that way. It was only friendly to give Joe a hint of how things ought to be done. Of course, he was innocent as a baby about the liquor traffic, and Mr. Tootell resolved to initiate him into a few of the tricks of the trade. Then Mr. Tootell discovered that to walk out to the Dragon, see how Joe was getting on, and refresh himself with a glass of amber-coloured ale, was a very pleasant way of passing the forenoon, until at last the host of that inn began to weary exceedingly of his visitor. Mr. Tootell understood the business too well not to speedily see that the Dragon gave no signs of ever becoming a paying concern, and it seemed a most extraordinary thing to him that shrewd old Joe Mercer did not see it also; he must be losing money over it—it might be slowly, but it must be surely; and the thing that surprised Mr. Tootell was that he seemed quite indifferent about it. Now, the losing of money in anything was a thing about which Joe Mercer had never been known to be phlegmatic; on the contrary, 'Cautious Joe,' as his intimates sometimes dubbed him, was well known to be excessively chary of scorching his fingers; his withdrawal from a concern that did not promise to pay fairly might be confidently predicted, the one mistake that he had never been known to fall into was that of throwing good money after bad. A favourite aphorism of his was 'the first loss is the best and cheapest.' What on earth made him take the Dragon Inn to begin with? What on earth made him go on with it, was a problem which so interested Mr. Tootell, that he devoted himself to its solution with much

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energy. Like most men of the Paul Pry type, he was pachydermatous. Mrs. Mercer was downright rude to him, her daughter flouted him, as, indeed, she always had done, while, thick-skinned as Mr. Tootell indubitably was, even he could not regard Joe's welcome as cordial—still he continued his visits with undiminished pertinacity, and eventually, like other bores, he got to be endured; he was a cross that had to be borne, and as Joe Mercer said slyly, what his wife's tongue failed to bring about, it was hopeless for any one else to attempt.

'Excellent ale this, Joe,' quoth Mr. Tootell, as he sat in the bar, in the full enjoyment of a pipe and a cool tankard. 'Reyther too strong to give to customers, though; might get into their heads, and we don't want 'em drunk on the premises, do we? Wants a little judicious blending, eh, Joe?'

'I only keep the one sort of ale,' replied Mercer, 'we've not enough custom for varieties.'

'Pooh. What's that got to do with it? The first duty of an innkeeper is to take care of his customers' health and his own pockets—which means take care they never get their liquor too strong. By the way, who was that fellow I saw in here yesterday afternoon?'

'Don't know,' replied Joe. 'He is a stranger in these parts, I fancy.'

'Odd, uncommon odd. I thought you looked as if you had met before.'

'So we have,' replied Mercer. 'He has been in here two or three times for refreshment of some sort.'

'Curious, very curious. Not the first stranger, by two or three, that I've met at your place, Joe. Now, what can bring strangers in these parts to the Dragon? Your ale is good, I grant, but it ain't such tip-top tipple as all that. Besides, the place hasn't a name, you know.'

'Never you mind, Tootell; the Dragon had a good name in days gone by, and will have again, you'll see. It don't follow because you've given up business that every one else is to do the same.'

'Don't be edgy, Joe. I take a friendly interest in you. A business like this is depressing, and makes a man

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irritable, I know. I bear you no malice. Cheer up, Joe. I wish you luck, and bid you good afternoon.'

As Mr. Tootell left the house he encountered the stranger who had attracted his attention on the previous day, and marvelled much what this constant customer, as he termed him, of Joe's might be, and what he was doing in these parts.

'I wish I could hear what they're saying to each other,' he muttered.

Mr. Tootell's vanity would have hardly been tickled had his wish been gratified, for the stranger's first words to Joe were:

'Why do you stand that prying old fool pottering about the premises?'

CHAPTER II

MORE CATCHES THAN ONE

EXETER *versus* Exmouth. It is the night before the match, and like the Saxons on the eve of Hastings, the Exeter men are holding high revel—not perhaps the best preparation for the 'twisters' and 'shooters' that await them next day. At present, however, the quaint coffee-room at the Beacon rings with the mirth of as pleasant a party as ever gathered round its centre table, the life and soul of which appeared to be a tall, good-looking young fellow, with bold blue eyes and a heavy blonde moustache.

'Well, Fred,' exclaims one of the party, 'we never thought you would turn up in time for the match. You have three or four days' leave left, too.'

'Leave,' said the young man before alluded to, 'what's the use of that when you are regularly cleaned out. Turn up? The only doubt about my turning up was whether I could raise enough money to pay for my ticket; after the dressing we got at Goodwood, sovereigns were sovereigns.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' said another of the party. 'I saw by the papers that backers had a bad time of it. I thought of you, Hallaton.'

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'Very kind of you,' returned that young gentleman; 'but what recalled my interesting self to your memory?'

'Don't you recollect, when the Colonel rather hesitated about giving you leave, you said it would be hundreds out of your pocket if he didn't let you go to Goodwood.'

'Ah! yes,' replied Fred Hallaton, laughing; '"Hope springs eternal," &c., and fallacious as we know it, we still cling fondly to the old illusion.'

At one angle of the coffee-room, and in close vicinity to the central table, was a small recess, which seemed meant for the special accommodation of either a misanthrope or of two people who had something very confidential to say to one another. It was tenanted at present by a gentleman who was dining alone, a dark wirily-built man, of medium height, with a pair of restless grey eyes. He was apparently absorbed in his dinner, which was of a more luxurious nature than that of his neighbours. He had taken little heed of the badinage of the cricketers until the allusion to Goodwood aroused his attention. As Hallaton's name caught his ear, a smile stole over his face, and he tossed off a glass of champagne with considerable gusto. From the alcove where he was seated he could not see above one or two of his neighbours, and of these Hallaton was not one; but he was a man of excellent memory, and not likely to forget a name which he had written down with much profit to himself so often during the late Goodwood meeting. Sam Mercer indeed was quite as shrewd a business man as his father, but with more dash and go in him than perhaps the elder man had ever had; a keenly observant man, and one who rarely forgot anything that had once come to his knowledge. He rather wanted to learn something about Mr. Hallaton, for as yet all he knew of him was confined to the fact that he was in the Royal Artillery, which information he had gathered from the young gentleman's betting-book, on the cover of which was stamped his name and regiment. He had never met him before the other day, and during the Goodwood week had found him a good customer.

'It would be as well,' thought Sam Mercer, 'to find out what his prospects are; if he is not tinny, he won't last long, considering the way he bet at Goodwood.'

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As the cricketing party broke up, Hallaton strolled up the room to look out of the window. As his eye fell on the tenant of the recess, he exclaimed, 'Mercer, by Jove? What on earth are you doing here?'

'Well, Mr. Hallaton, I belong to these parts; and we most of us, as you know, take a bit of a holiday after the Sussex fortnight.'

'Ah,' replied Hallaton, laughingly, 'and you can all afford it this year, which is more than we can. I only hope we shall have better luck to-morrow than I had at Goodwood.'

'Hope you may, sir; at all events, it looks like fine weather.'

Hallaton nodded good-humouredly, and then made his way after his companions to the smoking-room, little thinking what an influence the acquaintance of the bookmaker was destined to have upon his future life.

The match between Exeter and Exmouth always occasioned considerable excitement, and attracted a fashionable gathering. The strength of the two elevens was always somewhat difficult to estimate, on account of the ever-changing element which pervaded both places. Exmouth was constantly reinforced by some good cricketers amongst the visitors, who took temporary service under its banner; whilst Exeter, if it could not reckon on gathering strength from visitors, always had the soldiers to fall back upon, who at times lent very valuable aid. As the bookmaker predicted, it was a glorious day, and the pretty cricket-ground was thronged in consequence. The Exmouth men had gone in first, and disasters fell thick upon them, and it looked at one time as if they were about to be disposed of for a very poor score, but the tail of the eleven discovered unexpected vitality. One of the visitors who was put in seventh man developed hitting powers which he had been far from being credited with. He fairly collared the bowling, and what that means at cricket we all know. Bowler after bowler was tried against him, but his eye was now well in, and he hit them all over the field with apparent ease, and satisfaction to himself. His partners, too, had gained courage, and the score ran up apace. Instead of being all out for some seventy or eighty runs, as was at

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one time threatened, the Exmouth men had quite doubled that score. There was still one wicket to fall, and that seemed hard to get. At one end was the champion, who had come so opportunely to the succour of his side; at the other was a steady and cautious man, who troubled himself nothing about run-getting, but devoted himself solely to the keeping up of his wicket. The bowlers were demoralised, and there seemed no parting this last pair. At last the chance came. Fred Hallaton was scouting deep as 'long field.' Suddenly the champion of the afternoon lifted a half-volley, high in the air, and apparently over the heads of the fielders. Amidst shouts of 'well-hit,' Hallaton started like a deer in pursuit, and finished the Exmouth innings by as brilliant a one-handed catch as ever was seen on that ground. Though never losing hold of the ball, Hallaton had run at such speed that he was unable to stop himself till he blundered right into the benches, which were placed round the boundary. As he threw up the ball, amidst cries of 'well caught' and quite a round of applause, he turned to apologise to a smartly-dressed good-looking young woman into whose arms he had all but precipitated himself.

'Ten thousand pardons,' he exclaimed, 'but you see he had given us such a deal of trouble. I hope I have done no harm to your dress.'

'Not at all," replied the young lady with a smile, and flashing a pair of wicked black eyes upon him.

'Well caught, indeed, sir,' said a voice close to him. 'My sister, I am sure, would have forgiven you, Mr. Hallaton, if you had torn her skirts ever so bad, merely to see such a catch made. It looked two to one against us at one time, but I reckon it's even money now.'

'Splendidly fielded. Who is he?' exclaimed a haughty-looking gentleman, who was exhibiting considerable expanse of white waistcoat and heavy gold watch-chain, in the front row of the seats in the pavilion. 'Hallaton, did you say?' he continued, in reply to one of his neighbours who had furnished him with the name. 'Not Hallaton of the Artillery, is it? Playing for Exeter, no doubt it is! The name is not common. Why, God bless me, I had a letter from his uncle months ago asking me to be civil to him, as he was

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coming to Exeter; but dear me, I've had so much to do, I've never had time to look him up. You recollect my telling you all about it, Mary?'

'No, papa,' replied a slight, fair, ladylike-looking girl who was seated by his side, 'I wish you had. I'd have taken care then that we did the civil to him, and sent him an invitation for something or other.'

'I'll go down and make his acquaintance at once,' and so saying Mr. Lydney bustled down the stairs in search of the hero of the moment.

Mr. Lydney, the prosperous banker of the town, was a very busy man, as well as a wealthy one. He lived in very good style, entertained largely, and nothing went on in Exmouth without his taking a part in it. He subscribed liberally to all the institutions, the cricket club, &c. Mary Lydney, his only child, kept house for him, and it was a marvel to most people that she remained Mary Lydney still. She was very nice-looking, and, there could be no doubt, must inherit a considerable fortune eventually from her father, to say nothing of what he might choose to do during his lifetime if she married with his approval. Curiously enough, she had been twice formally engaged, and the fact had been publicly announced, and yet upon both occasions the affair had been broken off, after having gone on for some time. In neither case had any but the most conventional reason been assigned. The banker only remarked that he supposed Mary had thought better of it, that his daughter must do as she pleased, and that he had no desire to force her inclinations. Now, if Mary Lydney had been a flirt, this would have been easy to understand; but there never was a girl with less coquetry in her nature. Moreover, those who knew Mary Lydney best declared that in the first instance she had been very much in earnest and most thoroughly in love. Both men had been quite eligible in every respect. True, neither had been rich, but surely in her case that was no great objection. However, so matters stood, and this was as much as any one, except, perhaps, the father and daughter, knew about it.

Mr. Lydney failed in his attempt to find Fred Hallaton. That gentleman, instead of returning to the pavilion, had remained to improve his acquaintance with Miss Mercer. He

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had been much struck by the black-browed young beauty, and she, on her part, was never loth to receive the attentions of a new admirer. She was insatiable in her thirst for admiration, excessively proud of her personal appearance, and quite capable of carrying on three or four flirtations at the same time—a woman to whom a man was not likely to become more than a caprice. It is needless to be said that shyness was not one of Miss Mercer's attributes. She conversed readily with Hallaton, and questioned him freely about himself and his pursuits. Her brother, in the course of the morning, had mentioned his meeting with Hallaton on the preceding night at the Beacon Hotel, and also that that gentleman was one of the officers quartered at Exeter. Sarah had never had an officer in her train as yet. She saw that Fred was rather struck, exerted herself to the utmost to captivate him, and succeeded in enchaining the young artilleryman to her side till two or three cries of 'Hallaton' attracted his attention, and rising in response to these shouts, Fred was curtly adjured by one of his comrades to 'come along and look sharp, as he was the next man to go in.'

'Wish me luck, won't you?' he said, as he prepared to comply with the injunction, 'and don't think that I shall fail to find my way out to the Dragon before long.'

A saucy nod was the sole reply, and shortly afterwards, having donned his armour, Hallaton sallied forth to do battle for Exeter.

Once more Fred Hallaton did his side good service, and though his innings could hardly be described as brilliant, yet it was a useful one, and by the time he returned to the pavilion the match bore a very interesting aspect. Exeter had still three wickets to fall, and were only thirty-seven runs behind their opponents. On entering the pavilion Fred was promptly laid hands on by the banker.

'I must introduce myself, Mr. Hallaton. My name is Lydney, old friend of your Uncle Bob's. Haven't seen him for years, by the way. He wrote to me about you, but I'm ashamed to say I've been so busy lately that I have not been able to look you up. However, I hope you'll come and see us. My daughter shall send you a line; come up and be introduced to her;' and with this the banker carried

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off Hallaton to the roof of the stand, and introduced him to Mary Lydney. His mind powerfully impressed with the bold black eyes and vivid colouring of Sarah Mercer, Fred's first impression of Miss Lydney was that she was pale and insipid; but he soon discovered that she was a pleasant enough girl to talk to, and that her conversation was not so flavourless as he had been prepared to find it. Mary apologised for her father's oversight, and warmly seconded the invitation.

'I will send you a line to the Barracks with all formalities, Mr. Hallaton, and trust that you will come and see us. Of course, there will be a bed for you. In the meantime, perhaps you will waive ceremony and dine with us to-night?'

But that Fred Hallaton declined to do, and with a courteous hope that Miss Lydney would be present to see the finish of the game on the morrow, Hallaton took his departure, and made the best of his way back to the Beacon Hotel.

CHAPTER III

THE BANKER'S DAUGHTER

Mr. Sam Mercer was not wont to stay with his family during his brief visits to Exmouth. He invariably put up at the Beacon Hotel. He was fond of and on excellent terms with his parents; but his business as a bookmaker left him but little leisure either for writing or visiting, and it was no uncommon thing for months to elapse without any communication taking place between him and his people. He had been not a little surprised to hear upon his arrival at the Beacon that his father had taken the old Dragon Inn. He had seen the old man dip into all sorts of eccentric speculations. He knew what a reticent man he was on all matters of business, but as Sam said, 'The old 'un generally came out the right end of the horn.' What this new fad of his might mean Sam could form no idea, and whatever his crafty parent's designs might be, he knew him

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too well to suppose for one moment that they would be unfolded to him. Joe Mercer had a high opinion of his son's natural astuteness; he had also, on a slight scale, tested Sam's business capabilities; when he was a youngster, about twenty, he had furnished him with a modest capital and told him to start for himself. Sam elected to make his start in America, and it was there that he still further cultivated a taste for horse-racing with which he had been always bitten. With a shrewd head for figures, he soon saw there was money to be made at it, and was tolerably successful when out there. But if you mean to make money in business, you must go where business is, and Sam knew that for the professional racing-man there was no country in the world like England. He accordingly returned there, and enrolled himself amongst the noisy fraternity of the 'ring.'

Strong, active, keen-witted, betting on strict mathematical principles, and regarding the losses as mere temporary fluctuations in business, Sam steadily worked his way upwards. He was soon well known as perfectly 'straight,' and acquired a very considerable *clientèle*. His father more than once advanced him money with which to extend his operations, and as Sam in due course repaid such loans, he stood high in the old man's estimation. If not one of the leading magnates, Sam Mercer was a thoroughly known man amidst the members of the mystic circle, a favourite with most of them, and rather celebrated for the queer Americanisms with which he was apt to garnish his conversation. He had promised to take his sister to see the finish of the match, and the next morning, after an early breakfast, Sam wended his way to the Dragon. There he was cordially welcomed by his own people, and introduced to a Mr. Brent, who Sarah informed him, as they walked in the garden afterwards, was a stranger staying in the house, 'though what he, father, or any one else can want to stay at the Dragon for, beats me.'

'Never you mind the old 'un,' rejoined Sam; 'his head is screwed on the right way, I guess; but as for this Brent, it is odd, unless he has come after you, Sallie.'

'He needn't trouble to let me know it, if he has,' replied

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the girl, with a toss of her head. 'Tis not likely I'd look at the likes of him.'

'He might think you good-looking, though you don't think him,' replied her brother, laughing. 'But how do you like the move?'

'Oh, I don't mind it much,' replied Sarah. 'One house is pretty near the same as another while we go on in this old pottering way. I want to go away and begin life afresh. Everybody says father has got money, and yet we go on just as we did when we were supposed to be poor.'

'Ah!' said Sam; 'you want to splurge about a bit—keep a carriage, and play the lady?'

The girl nodded. 'I'm sick of tramping up and down the esplanade,' she remarked. 'I want a change of some sort.'

'Never fear. A good-looking young woman like you will get that before long. Time we went tramping if we mean to see the finish of this match.'

On their way into Exmouth Sam suddenly exclaimed, 'Here's old Tootell; he is certain to stop us and ask where we're going.'

'He ought not to ask me,' replied Sarah, laughing; 'for the last time he did, I told him bluntly not in his direction. Now, Sam, that is one of the plagues of keeping an inn. That dreadful old man is the torment of our lives. We can't shut the door against him as we could before we turned innkeepers. You know what he is, and he is eternally prying about the Dragon; comes to see how we're getting on, he says. What Mr. Brent is doing here puzzles you; as for Mr. Tootell, it causes him sleepless nights.'

But upon this occasion, strange to say, Tootell raised his hat and hurried past them. Like many idle men, he passed a considerable portion of his time in looking out of the window, and from that post of vantage his attention had been attracted a few minutes previously by the appearance of Mr. Brent making his way to the very centre of the town. He had never seen Mr. Brent in Exmouth before. What could he want there? Mr. Tootell was going up to the cricket-ground, but he considered that if possible to discover what had brought Mr. Brent into Exmouth of paramount importance. To know what his

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neighbours were doing, and to ascertain who and what any stranger might be who turned up in the town or its outskirts, had become quite a disease with Mr. Tootell. Since his retirement from the 'public' line he had been deprived of what was to him a source of unmitigated enjoyment. Mr. Tootell had a great belief in his own powers as a comic entertainer, and was wont to give specimens of his talents in that line to a few of his intimates in his own bar parlour. These performances were usually received with great enthusiasm; his songs and recitations met with much applause, as is wont to be the case when the host is an entertainer in more ways than one, and Tootell on such occasions pushed the bowl round with the generous freedom of the post-boys in the famous lyric. His exhibitions of the seasons, in which his face was by turns supposed to express spring, summer, autumn, and winter, always brought down the house, and were the most extraordinary exhibitions of facial contortion ever seen. Some carping critic, it is true, had derisively said that if Mr. Tootell would turn his attention to grinning through a horse-collar, he would be sure of the top prize in most country fairs. Be that as it may, the self-satisfied tones in which he announced laughing spring, slumberous summer, fitful autumn, and boisterous winter, and then proceeded to facially illustrate them, was a sight always received with inextinguishable laughter.

Mr. Tootell, indeed, was much given to theatricals, and never lost an opportunity of displaying his histrionic powers; and though people were unkind enough to say that whether he made up, or whether he made faces, he was always Tootell, and an irredeemable stick, yet that was by no means Mr. Tootell's idea of his own humour as a low comedian. It is necessary to mention his passion for theatricals, because this taste initiated him to some extent in the art of making-up; and though he might perhaps fail in his own person, yet it showed him how clever actors could disguise themselves by the assistance of wigs and pigments, and this knowledge, as we shall see, was destined to involve Mr. Tootell in an awkward predicament. When he met Sam Mercer and his sister he had for the moment lost sight of Mr. Brent, and it was his anxiety to once more hold that gentleman in view that caused him to pass

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them so hurriedly. He very soon recovered the trail, and following Brent at a wary distance, saw him go into an ironmonger's shop. This circumstance would have hardly cost any man but Tootell a second thought, but that worthy, muttering to himself, 'Now, what can he want there?' stopped on reaching the window and looked in. Brent was engaged in purchasing some few things, apparently connected with the inn-keeping trade, such as taps, funnels, &c. Having obtained these, he put the parcel under his arm, and coming out of the shop, proceeded to retrace his steps in the direction of the Dragon. Mr. Tootell shook his head, and wended his way to the cricket-ground immersed in a brown study. Who was this man Brent? What was he staying at the Dragon for, and what the dickens did he want with taps, funnels, &c.?

'Bought 'em for old Joe Mercer, I s'pose; old Joe didn't buy things like that for himself;' and once more Mr. Tootell shook his head, and proceeded in quest of information.

Play was in full swing when he arrived there, and the match in that interesting condition of being any one's game. Exmouth was just finishing their second innings, but had not done quite so well as in their first essay; still, for all that, what with having some few runs in hand on the first innings, they promised to put the Exeter men in for a very respectable total. A few minutes more and the last Exmouth wicket has fallen, and after the usual pause Exeter sets to work to make the 122 runs necessary to victory. It is almost needless to observe that Mr. Tootell was more absorbed in watching the doings of his neighbours than in watching the cricket.

'Hallo,' he muttered to himself, 'who's that young spark that Sallie Mercer has got hold of? Handsome girl, Sallie, but she must be getting on. Let me see, how old is she?'

Mr. Tootell was a peripatetic chronological table, or as the young ladies of his acquaintance expressed it, 'an old horror about dates.' But his thoughts on Miss Mercer's age were dissipated by his running against a fellow gossip from Exeter—something of his own kidney—and from him he immediately sought the information he wanted about Miss Mercer's cavalier.

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'That,' returned the other—'that is Mr. Hallaton, the young officer who made the great catch yesterday for Exeter. He seems a little caught himself just now, doesn't he?'

'Ah! you've got quite a new lot of officers this year in Exeter, haven't you? How d'ye do, Mr. Mercer, we were just talking about the officers in Exeter, and you were saying, Mr. Wilson——'

'That we have got a very lively lot this time.'

'Throw their money about freely, eh?' said Sam 'And keep the tambourine a-rolling. It must make a good deal of difference to the town what sort of set you have at the barracks.'

'Yes,' replied Wilson; 'sometimes they are a much more moneyed lot than others, and of course that makes a difference.'

'And those you've got there now are full of money?' inquired Sam.

'Just so,' replied Wilson. 'There's young Hallaton and two or three more of 'em must spend a deal of money one way and the other.'

Sam Mercer passed on with a careless nod, and left the two old gossips to exchange scandal at their leisure. Young Hallaton, at all events, had the reputation of being well off in the town where he was quartered, and this was a little bit of information that Mercer was glad to acquire, as he trusted to henceforth number young Hallaton amongst his customers. Not that he had any sinister designs against that young gentleman, but if he was destined to lose his money over racing, it might as well go into his, Sam Mercer's, pockets, as any one else's, and he thought Fred Hallaton far too excitable a young man not to find the turf a very expensive pursuit before he was much older.

Mr. Hallaton devoted himself pretty well to Miss Mercer nearly the entire afternoon, and Sarah was nothing loth to parade her admirer before the eyes of Exmouth then and there assembled. In fact, when his innings came and he returned to the pavilion without making much addition to the score, his bosom ally Dicky Chives could not resist chaffing him about his flirtation.

'Look here, young man,' said Dicky, 'flirting is all right

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and regular, but there are times and seasons for it. You can't expect to play cricket and flirt as outrageously as you have been doing. You would never have muffed that ball if you had been cool and in your right mind. Of course, you were thinking how you would astonish that handsome girl, in whose pocket you have been sitting all the afternoon, and you did!'

'Shut up, Dicky,' was the laughing rejoinder, 'we all play a little too slow at 'em sometimes.'

'More especially when we are wool-gathering, as you were,' said Chives. 'Mark me, young fellow,' he continued with mock solemnity, 'your passion for petticoats will be your ruin. . . . There he goes again,' soliloquised Dicky, as Fred ran up the stairs leading to the roof to shake hands with Miss Lydney. 'He can't keep away from 'em.' And with that Mr. Chives hurried to the refreshment-bar to calm his feelings.

Dicky Chives was a well-known man in the Royal Artillery, and an athlete of no mean description. Usually captain of their cricket team wherever he was quartered, and always engaged in boating and racquet-playing, shooting, or something of that description, he held curiously aloof from feminine society. Popular and well known amongst men, he was never seen in a ball-room, and when his brother-officers thought to return hospitalities they had received in that fashion, it was declared that Dicky, although ready enough to put his hand in his pocket, invariably applied for three days' leave, until, to use his own expression, 'the shine was over.'

'Sorry for your bad luck, personally, Mr. Hallaton,' said Mary Lydney, as she shook hands; 'but my sympathies, of course, are all with Exmouth, a most interesting match. Three wickets to fall. Oh, no! There goes another, and Exeter wants forty-one runs to win yet.'

'And will never get it,' exclaimed the banker. 'It will be a close finish, but we shall just pull through. I shall be broke,' he continued, laughing, 'if we don't. I've got a sovereign on Exmouth.'

'We shall bring your heart into your mouth yet,' rejoined Hallaton, smiling. 'The last two wickets often give a deal of trouble.'

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Fred's careless words came true in the present instance, and Exeter crept up within thirteen runs of their opponents before their stumps were scattered for the last time, and Exmouth was left the victor by that amount.

'A capital match,' exclaimed the banker; 'and mind, Hallaton, you have promised to pay us a visit next week.'

'All right, I am not likely to forget Miss Lydney's commands.' And so saying Fred raised his straw hat, and rejoined his comrades.

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD BALL-ROOM

'So you are off to-morrow, Sam,' said Miss Mercer to her brother, as he walked home with her after the cricket match; 'how I wish I was!'

'Well, I guess you've no cause to complain,' he replied. 'You had a pretty good time to-day, anyhow. That young Hallaton was "salooning" you about pretty well the whole afternoon. You seemed to take to him rather kindly.'

'I should rather have said that he took kindly to me,' retorted the girl, laughing. 'Yes, he is rather nice. I wonder whether he has got any money. These officers, I've heard say, are seldom rich, for all their laced jackets.'

'They have a good bit of money some of them, replied her brother. 'I know, because I have dealings with them. This young Hallaton, I fancy, is well off; but it's not likely to matter much to you. No doubt he admires you, but a swell like him is not likely to come to the Dragon for a wife.'

'That's so like a brother,' replied the girl, pettishly. 'I'm sure I wish we had never come to the old tumble-down place. One hears such queer noises there at night. I declare if I believed in ghosts I should think it was haunted.'

'Queer noises,' said Sam; 'odd, what sort of noises?'

'Oh! I don't know, the whole place creaks. It's only the windows or rats, I suppose.'

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'I shall say good-bye to you here,' said Sam. 'I said it to the old folks this morning. Is there anything wrong with mother, by the way? She's got a worried, anxious look about her that she didn't use to have.'

'Nothing that I know of,' rejoined the girl.

'My fancy, perhaps,' replied her brother, as he kissed her, and then, turning on his heel, he strolled back to his hotel.

Miss Mercer walked on towards the Dragon, excessively pleased with herself and all the world. She had had a good-looking young officer dangling at her side before the public nearly the whole of the afternoon. She was conscious of looking her best, and that her proceedings had been viewed by her friends with envy and all uncharitableness. She smiled to herself as she fancied she heard the expressions—'Forward thing!' and 'Look how that Sallie Mercer is carrying on!' Miss Mercer was no innocent girl in her teens, but a young woman who knew the world. She might not be accomplished, but she was as quick-witted as any of her family, and less burdened with principle. She had no pitiable weakness, for instance, about adhering to the truth if she considered a lie would serve her purpose better. Just the sort of woman whose fatal beauty lures men to their undoing. She threw her head up proudly as she thought of her brother's remark. 'Not come to the Dragon for a wife, indeed,' she muttered. 'Sam don't know much about women, or else he'd not talk foolish like that. There's plenty will come to the Dragon, or anywhere else when Sallie Mercer lifts up her finger,' and then she began to reflect that though it was undoubtedly true that she might have been married more than once, yet it was equally certain that she had never as yet hooked a fish she considered worth landing. As for young Hallaton, he had promised to come out and see her at the Dragon; and let Sam think what he might, if she could only see a little more of that gentleman she fancied that the result would be in her own hands.

Sam, on his part, as he walked back to the Beacon, dismissed all thought of young Hallaton from his mind. 'I daresay,' he reflected, 'that Sallie does get a little tired of the old jog-trot life. It's all very well for a few days' rest,

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but it would kill me in a month. However, peace and happiness ain't much in the way of a regular racing-man, and the cry of "I'll take six to four" beats the song of the thrushes and the blackbirds into fits! It's a rum start what made the old 'un take that inn; however, he knows what he is about, and is more likely to have an ace up his sleeve than expose his hand,' and then Sam Mercer went into the Beacon to snatch a hasty dinner before catching the night mail to town.

Country quarters from time immemorial have enjoyed an unenviable notoriety for the facility they afford those quartered in them of getting into scrapes, and it was not likely that the metropolis of the West was going to prove an exception. Fred Hallaton had been unmistakably smitten by the belle of the Dragon. He had a good deal of idle time on his hands; Exmouth and Exeter were by rail but twenty minutes apart, and two days after the cricket-match saw Fred Hallaton making his way out to call on Miss Mercer. That young lady received him with the sweetest of smiles.

'Ah, this is good of you, Mr. Hallaton!' she exclaimed, as she extended her hand. 'You men are very apt to promise to come and see us, and then forget all about us till we next help you to kill an idle afternoon.'

'I can't fancy any one forgetting you,' replied Fred, with an ardent glance. 'I was so much interested in your account of this old inn, that I thought I would take advantage of your promise to show it me.'

'I don't know that there's much to show,' returned the girl. 'It is more the stories connected with it; but I'll show you one room running out at the back which really is curious.'

She led the way up a few stairs, then along a passage, then down a few stairs again at the other end, threw open a door, and said: 'This is the ball-room.'

'Ball-room!' ejaculated Hallaton; 'and what on earth does an inn like the Dragon want with a ball-room?'

'Well,' replied Sarah, 'the house is a good big one, as you see, and years and years ago people used to come out from Exmouth in the summer-time and dance here.'

It was a good-sized room, quite capable of containing a

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party of four or five score people for dancing purposes. At one end was a much-out-of-repair little music-gallery. Joe Mercer had evidently not thought it worth while to go to any expense about doing up this part of the house. There was lots of old furniture heaped up about it, broken chairs, benches, &c., and it was pervaded with that peculiar smell which characterises a room in which the windows are never opened; the dust of many years had accumulated on the rickety furniture, which had probably been taken over by tenant after tenant, when the palmy days of the Dragon had departed. It was evidently many years since the room had been used in any way.

'The old people about,' continued Sarah, 'declare that there used to be no end of fun and capers going on here when they were young; that there were lots of dances went on during the summer months, and in the winter they say it was given up to the smugglers, who used to drink and smoke and carry on all sorts of mad games. There's an old fellow here—oh, ever so old, over eighty, I'm sure—to whom I sometimes go and talk when I'm dull, who tells horrible tales about what went on at the Dragon when he was young; all lies, I dare say.'

'Ah! I don't know,' replied Hallaton. 'I fancy there was a good deal of wild work went on along these coasts in those times. Smuggling was at its height then, and I should think those who followed it were a pretty rough lot.'

'Yes, old Mutter tells dreadful tales about the Dragon. Perhaps he only does it to frighten me. He says the smugglers when they got mad with drink would quarrel amongst themselves, and use their knives and pistols on one another. He declares he has seen more than one man carried out of this room dead, and he's got a horrible story of an adventurous exciseman who got in amongst the smugglers in disguise, but was discovered before he could get back to his comrades with the information he had gained, and was never heard of afterwards.'

'And what did people say became of him?' asked Hallaton, who was getting much interested in the legends of the Dragon, or, it might be, in the narrator of them, who was looking extremely handsome in her pink cambric morning-dress.

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'He was murdered, old Mutter declares. However, I know I wouldn't come into this room at night, and I don't believe in ghosts, neither. But there's something uncanny about it. Look,' she added, 'do you see this trap-door in the corner? They say that leads down to where the smugglers used to stow their brandy and stuff.'

'Has anybody ever been down to see?' asked Hallaton.

'Father did, when he first took the house. He says there are only a couple of large cellars which haven't been used for a long time. But come out into the sunshine; this old room always gives me the creeps.'

As they went towards the door Hallaton's eye was suddenly caught by a candlestick, a box of lucifer matches, and a short clay pipe which were lying on a rickety table not very far from the trap-door.'

'The only sign of the days we live in,' he exclaimed, laughing, as he touched the lucifers with his stick.

'Odd,' said Sarah. 'I wonder who has been into the room. I'm sure neither of the two girls would enter if you paid them for it. I suppose it must have been father for something or other.'

They passed out of the room, and Miss Mercer led the way to the garden, where the conversation speedily took a more personal turn. Sarah had every reason to feel confident that she had not over-estimated her attractions. Fred Hallaton wandered about the garden with her for the best part of an hour, and was then formally presented to her parents as 'Mr. Hallaton, a friend of Sam's.'

Fred rather winced at this. Sam Mercer was, no doubt, a very respectable man in his line, but his acquaintanceship with Hallaton certainly did not justify his being described as one of that gentleman's 'friends.' Yet the girl had but cleverly taken advantage of the fact that it was her brother who had introduced Fred to her. Joe Mercer welcomed him with the greatest cordiality, insisted upon his having a glass of ale, said it was 'a queer old inn, and there was a many strange tales told about it.'

'I don't trouble my head about it myself, but Sarah there has a taste for these bygone tales. You must come over and see us again, sir, and get her to take you down

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the road a bit to old Mutter's. He will spin you yarns by the hour about it. I shouldn't wonder if old Bob had seen a sight or two in these walls he'd as lieve not speak about.'

'Thanks,' replied Fred, as he swallowed his ale and prepared to go. 'I shall take an early opportunity of coming over again; these smuggling legends always interest me, and you have promised to be my cicerone, Miss Mercer.'

She wasn't very clear what that was, but she nodded assent and flashed her black eyes up into his face as she accompanied him to the gate.

'Good-bye,' she said. 'Don't forget to come soon, and I'll take you down to see old Mutter. Only give the old man a little tobacco, and a trifle to buy rum with, and he'll go on yarning as long as you care to listen to him.' And then, with a quick little nod, she turned back to the house.

Fred Hallaton was conscious of having passed a very pleasant afternoon as he strode back on his way towards the railway station. As he neared his goal he encountered a fussy little man, who, after eyeing him with evident interest, suddenly took off his hat, and asked him if he could tell him what o'clock it was. As the stranger was palpably wearing a watch, at all events a chain, Fred thought it rather singular that he should make this request, and as he took out his own watch to comply with it, observed drily, 'I suppose yours doesn't go!'

'Well, yes, it does,' stammered the stranger; 'but, but not quite, with the—accuracy necessary'—and here the speaker's voice swelled as of a man at last safely delivered of his lie—'to the happiness of a man of punctual habits—'

'Half-past five, and I recommend you to look sharp,' said Hallaton, with a steady stare at his questioner. 'I should think your friends would be anxious to see you.'

'Yes,' replied Mr. Tootell, for he of course was the stranger. 'Poor old Joe Mercer looks to seeing me pretty well every day—and capital good ale at the Dragon, ain't it, sir?'

'How the devil should I know?' returned Hallaton so sharply that Mr. Tootell involuntarily took a step or two backwards.

'No offence,' he replied deprecatingly. 'I don't mean

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any harm, I'm sure, but old Joe does keep good ale, and Sallie is an uncommon fine gal.'

'I don't know who you are, or where you may be going,' rejoined Fred, fiercely; 'but I recommend you, wherever it is, to go, for if you pester me any more with your confounded remarks I'll chuck you down the next area we come across.'

'Oh, I don't want to intrude upon any one, especially the servants,' rejoined Mr. Tootell, drawing himself up in a way that provoked a smile from Fred Hallaton's lips; 'but I thought perhaps you were friendly with the Mercers.'

'Well, never mind what you thought,' rejoined Fred; 'my way lies here, and yours, no doubt, in some other direction.'

'Oh, I don't mind which way I walk; my time's at my own disposal; if you're going to the station, I'll just look in and see how my watch tallies with the station clock. Perhaps you have a train to catch? If both our tickers were wrong it will be a case of, 'Oh, what a surprise!' and Mr. Tootell was proceeding to warble a strain of the popular refrain, when Hallaton turned sharply upon him, and said, 'You had better take your musical talents, sir, where they will be appreciated; in the meanwhile. I wish you good afternoon.'

Mr. Tootell stopped; this was an insult to his vocal ability which he could not overlook. Moreover, as he admitted afterwards, 'That tall young man looked dangerous.' 'Huffy,' he remarked to himself, 'these military gents are apt to be supercilious. Now, I wonder if he has been out to the Dragon!'

CHAPTER V

TOOTELL IS PUZZLED

'I DON'T understand it, and I don't quite like it,' said Mrs. Mercer dogmatically, as she sat in the Dragon bar parlour conversing with her husband and Mr. Brent.

'Well, I don't much like it myself,' replied Joe. 'It's rather too risky a speculation for my taste.'

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'Nonsense!' said Brent; 'who's to suspect you? Did you ever make so much money in the time before? Business is just in full swing now. Another eighteen months and our fortune is made.'

'That's all true enough,' rejoined Mercer; 'but it's a dangerous game, and I wish I had never started on it.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' retorted Brent; 'we won't go into particulars. Who risks most, I should like to know—you or I?'

'That don't very much matter,' said Joe. 'When you are busted, it don't signify how much you're busted.'

'Come, come,' said Brent, soothingly, 'it's no use funking now. You've sailed as close to the wind many a time, I'll be bound.'

'Never!' said the other emphatically, as he brought his fist down on the table. 'I've not been over particular, I admit, but I never went as far as this before. It's all very well; you've been playing a game of hide-and-seek all your life—I haven't; there has never been anything against me that I couldn't face.'

'Oh, come!' rejoined Brent, 'you needn't go bragging about your character now. Remember, if you cut the whole business to-morrow you are in just the same scrape as if you carried on for another year or so. I'm not a rich man, and have got too much money in this business to drop such a paying concern. You *must* go on.'

'That's true, missis,' said Joe, turning to his wife. 'I'll back out as soon as I can; but it can't be yet.'

'Just so,' said Brent; 'now look here, we've been a little imprudent trusting to the ghost stories to keep the girls out of the old ball-room. We've been weak enough to leave the key in the lock. There is nobody but the maids, I suppose, ever goes near it.'

'No,' replied Mrs. Mercer; 'and neither of them dare go inside, I'll pound it.'

'It was Dan's turn on, so I wasn't downstairs. He said he heard voices in the ball-room this afternoon. It is well I had a special key made. That door must be kept locked in future.'

'I can't think who it could have been,' said Mercer, whose face betrayed unmistakable signs of uneasiness; 'but

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I'll take good care that the room is kept locked in future.' And here the appearance of Sarah with an inquiry as to whether supper was ready put an end to the conversation.

Fred Hallaton on his way home to Exeter became suddenly conscious of a violent desire to learn all that he could about the coast lore of Devonshire. He determined to set to work and pick up all the smuggling legends he could lay his hands on, and those connected with the old Dragon Inn in particular; but he did not think proper to dilate on his newly-acquired information for the benefit of his brother officers at dinner that evening. On the contrary, when questioned about his proceedings by his particular chum, Dicky Chives, he was peculiarly reticent concerning them, and was so unusually silent, that that worthy at last remarked drily, 'that whatever he had been doing, it didn't seem to have agreed with him.'

Young men in Fred Hallaton's state are either apt to be silent, or, worse still, garrulous; and then, as most of us have painful experience, they wax eloquent only on the one subject. Hallaton had attained his twenty-fifth year, and this was the first time he had ever been seriously attracted by a woman's charms. He had spent only two afternoons in Sarah's society, and was already entangled in a desperate flirtation with that young lady. In considerable danger, if he only knew it, of making an arrant fool of himself. The game was too uneven; he was over head and ears in love with her, whilst Sarah, though about his own age, was years older in all knowledge of affairs of the heart. If her flirtations had been numerous no one of them had cost her a regret. It was the cool, calculating player against the impetuous novice. Needless to add that the game was in the former's hands, and that the latter would be eventually at her mercy, hers to do what she willed with, to toss on one side, or to take to herself as a husband.

Chives, however, at the present had not the slightest suspicion that his comrade was so stricken; he often chaffed Fred about being 'a lady's man,' but that meant no more than that Hallaton was a ball-goer, fond of society, and not afraid of a woman when he met one. Dicky Chives knew in his heart that he was; he would have stood up without flinching to the biggest rough if he had insulted

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him, but to converse with a lady always threw Dicky into a state of nervous bewilderment. He had seen Hallaton paying great attention to a handsome girl during the cricket match, but he had no idea of who Sarah was, or what was her station. To see Fred doing cavalier was no new sight; and though he laughingly predicted that his weakness that way would prove his ruin, Mr. Chives really thought his chum perfectly well able to take care of himself, and would have manifested much incredulity if anybody had suggested that Hallaton was in a fair way to get himself into a terrible scrape. However, it was little likely that Fred's visits to the Dragon would cease at present, nor was it likely that they would be long before they came to the knowledge of Dicky Chives.

But there was another person who suspected the continuation of the flirtation that he had seen commenced on Exmouth Cricket Ground, and that was Mr. Tootell. Anything of that kind was a perfect godsend to the old gossip, who since his retirement from business had taken the supervision of all the love-making in Exmouth under his own care, and had in consequence run more than one narrow escape of being kicked for his pains. People are sometimes misunderstood; but Mr. Tootell's unappeasable curiosity was quite understanded by the people of Exmouth. He was dying to know if anything more had come of that promising beginning, and when he had seen Hallaton coming from the direction of the Dragon, he had done his best to learn from him whether he had been there. If this was so, it would make the inn highly interesting. He could see how old Joe Mercer was getting on, and superintend Sarah's little affair at the same time. He rubbed his hands with satisfaction; but here the 'something bitter' arose, as he reflected that they were desperately impetuous young people to meddle with. Mr. Hallaton's manner, he could but acknowledge, upon the one occasion on which he had spoken to him, had been far from friendly, while Miss Mercer, he knew of old, was dangerous to interfere with.

Still the master-passion triumphed; and heedless of the unpleasant consequences that had more than once attended his putting his nose into other people's affairs, Mr. Tootell haunted the Dragon more persistently than ever. No

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rebuff seemed to daunt him, although Mrs. Mercer would storm at him on the slightest provocation, although Sarah barely acknowledged his salutation, and although even Joe himself was as near morose as it was possible for him to be. Mr. Tootell bore it all with imperturbable good temper; he was not to be irritated; he came persistently morning after morning, sat for the best part of an hour over his pipe and mild ale, inquiring about every conceivable topic, from how the potatoes were getting on in the garden to how trade was doing at the bar, to when Sarah was going to be married, to what Mr. Brent was doing down there.

'How should I know?' replied Joe Mercer testily one morning. 'As long as a customer pays his bill, it is nothing to me what his reasons may be for stopping in my house.'

'Well, but what should you think they were?' pertinaciously inquired Tootell.

'I don't bother my head about it,' replied Joe. 'I wonder you don't try the ale at some other hotel occasionally.'

'Rather ungrateful of you that, Joe. You know I promised you when you took the Dragon that you should have the benefit of all my experience, and you shall.'

'I am not aware that I ever came to you for advice.'

'No, no, you wouldn't, Joe. You're a strong-willed man, with a shrewd head on your shoulders, that's what you are. You don't want everybody's advice about what you're going to do, not you; but for all that, it's the duty of your friends, when you go into a business you don't know anything about, to stand by you.'

'Confound it,' said Mercer; 'I know perfectly well what I'm about. I don't require your advice, nor any one else's.'

For that morning, at all events, Mr. Tootell was silenced, and finished his ale without making further inquiry. But he had not the slightest intention of abandoning his investigations, and was as determined as ever to find out what business it was that detained Mr. Brent in the neighbourhood, and whether young Hallaton was a constant visitor at the Dragon. He had never met the latter there, and to his interrogations on the subject both Joe and his

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wife professed complete ignorance of that gentleman's identity. 'We serve no one of that name,' had been Mercer's reply; 'but it is not to be supposed that I know the name of everybody who comes in for a glass of ale.' To which Mr. Tootell had replied tartly that they weren't so very numerous as to confuse a man's recollection. He suspected that the Mercers were not quite telling the truth, and in this we know he was well justified; but what are you to do with a man of this description? one might as well publish one's private affairs in the paper as make Mr. Tootell acquainted with them. In his thirst for information on this point, he had at length mustered up courage to inquire of Miss Mercer if she had met Mr. Hallaton lately; but that young lady rose to the occasion, and, with a scornful toss of her head, promptly replied: 'If you'll ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies,' and, case hardened as he was, Mr. Tootell did not dare to pursue the subject further. Miss Mercer was one of the few people of whom he stood in awe. Brent, too, Mr. Tootell saw but little of; he occasionally found that mysterious stranger in the bar when he visited the Dragon. But any attempt to inveigle Brent into conversation was hopeless. He was apparently a walking monosyllable, and the advent of Mr. Tootell seemed to be to him a signal for leaving the room; but gradually there stole upon the former a sort of shadowy idea that he had seen Brent before at some far-away time. Long ago, if it was so, and when or where it was, he had no conception. Although a great slice of his life had been passed in Exmouth, yet he had begun the world in London, and it was the profits he had made in the 'public' line there that had enabled him to take the house in Exmouth where he finally acquired his competency.

This idea once got into his head, Mr. Tootell cudgelled his brain ceaselessly as to who Brent was in the past, and as to where he had met him. He endeavoured to throw himself in his way on every occasion; but the opportunities vouchsafed him were few, and even when he did succeed in pouncing on his victim, Brent speedily made his escape. Save the one occasion upon which he had seen him in Exmouth, he had never encountered Brent except either in, or in the immediate vicinity of, the Dragon. It was all

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a haze, and he could make nothing of it. One thing only was clear to Mr. Tootell—to wit, if ever he had met Brent in former days, that was not the name he then went by; that he had never known any one so called he was perfectly certain. That he never encountered Hallaton was due chiefly to the fact that whereas Mr. Tootell usually frequented the Dragon in the morning, Fred generally paid his visits to Sarah in the afternoon, and partly to the mere accident that he had never as yet run across Hallaton on his way to and from the station. Hallaton's journeys to Exmouth had not as yet attracted the attention of his brother-officers. It was supposed that he had friends in the town, having been seen talking to Miss Lydney in the cricket pavilion, and the banker was not only a prominent feature in his own town, but was well known in Exeter besides.

'Mercer,' exclaimed Brent, as he entered the bar-parlour hurriedly soon after the termination of one of Mr. Tootell's visits, 'we must put a stop to that inquisitive old idiot coming here. We've got enough custom just to be the blind we want, and our customers are all of the right sort—men who come in simply for their drinks and a short rest, and nothing else—bar two. I don't much like that young officer coming here. However, there's no mistake about *why* he comes. He is after your daughter, and, I'm bound to say, don't seem to have eyes for anything else.'

'Well, Sarah can take care of herself,' replied Mercer; 'so never mind that part of it. He's a good sort, he don't want to know anything, he's no harm about the place, and you can't expect the girl *not* to have a sweetheart.'

'Oh, I don't so much mind young Hallaton,' returned Brent; 'but we must put a stop to that fellow Tootell coming here. I'd knock his head off for twopence.'

'Oh yes,' rejoined Joe, 'and there are times when I get so mad with his questioning, I could shake the life out of the wretched little atomy, although I've known him the last twenty years and more. But what good would that do? He's a vindictive little devil if he's thwarted, and he'd have either of us up at Exmouth for assault. It only calls attention to the house; and then it wouldn't suit either of us to be turned inside out by one of these lawyer chaps.'

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'No,' said Brent, 'it wouldn't suit my book to be in a witness-box at all. One never can tell what licence the beaks would allow a sharp lawyer.'

'He'd not mind either,' said Joe, with a twinkle in his eye—'that Tootell wouldn't mind a black eye or so to find out what has brought you down here.'

'No; as you say, it would draw attention to the house, more or less, and that's just what we don't want. I must devise some other scheme.'

CHAPTER VI

AN EMBARRASSING SALUTE

An invitation to spend a couple of days with the Lydneys reached Fred Hallaton in due course, and as that gentleman had nothing particular to do he resolved to accept it. He thought he could indulge his infatuation for Sarah Mercer quite as easily from the banker's house as from the barracks. His mornings would probably be at his own disposal, and it would be only paying his devotions before noon instead of after. The banker had a capital house, standing in very pretty grounds in the outskirts of the town, and here Hallaton and his portmanteau were deposited just in time to dress for dinner. When—after making his toilet—he descended to the drawing-room, he found several people already assembled there. Mr. Lydney kept a capital cook, and prided himself on his little dinners, and not without reason. He was one of those genial hosts who at once set their guests at ease, and, without being particularly brilliant, have the knack of setting the ball of conversation going. Though celebrated for his wine, the banker was not remarkable for either witty epigram or sparkling anecdote, but he possessed the invaluable gift of tact. You must have been very dull or hopelessly shy to find yourself left out of the conversation at Mr. Lydney's table.

Fred found himself placed on his hostess's right. The banker's wife had been dead for some years, and Mary Lydney had long taken the head of her father's table. As

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it had fallen to his lot to take in a lady with whom the making of conversation was a toilsome and arduous duty, he not unnaturally turned to his neighbour on the other side. There he at all events had no cause to complain, and Fred was soon chatting gaily and pleasantly enough.

'I came across a most extraordinary old lunatic here the other day,' he remarked. 'He stopped me to ask the time, having a watch on himself, and then proceeded to cross-examine me as to where I had been, and where I was going. A little, thin, wizened old man in a tall straw hat. Can you identify him by that description, Miss Lydney?'

Mary burst out laughing. 'Papa,' she exclaimed, 'please listen to this. Now, Mr. Hallaton, please repeat your little story. I think you'll find your friend is pretty well known.'

Fred accordingly reiterated his story, and as he finished a laugh ran round the table, and 'Tootell' burst from several lips.

'Tootell!' exclaimed Fred; 'who and what is he?'

'Quite a character in Exmouth,' said the banker, while the words 'horrid old wretch' escaped his daughter's lips, and such comments as 'insufferable old bore,' 'intolerable nuisance,' &c., fell from others of the party.

'Why, surely,' rejoined Fred, 'he can't annoy any of you; he has no pretensions to be a gentleman. What do you mean?'

'No, no,' replied Mr. Lydney; 'he is only a retired innkeeper, and a chartered bugbear, a regular Old Man of the Sea that Exmouth can't shake off. He is a most respectable man, and very respectful, but his uncontrollable desire to pry into his neighbours' affairs gets him into all manner of scrapes.'

'I should rather think so,' said Fred.

'Yes,' remarked Miss Lydney, 'and his age and diminutive stature as a rule get him out of them. Men get very angry with him, but they can't beat such a little creature as that, tiresome as he is,' and then the conversation drifted into other channels. When the ladies left the room the men drew up to their host's end of the table.

'I rode past the old Dragon Inn to-day,' remarked one of the guests, as he helped himself to a bumper of the

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banker's claret. 'You, like myself, Lydney, can recollect it as an inn for many years, though its prosperous times were before our day.'

'Yes; though I can recollect it in my boyhood as a house that did a respectable business, and I've heard my father tell all sorts of queer tales that were current about it when he was a young man. I know he said that more than once, when out picnicking there, he had danced in the old ball-room.'

'Well, I never thought to see it become an inn again,' said the first speaker; 'and what possessed any man to try such a hopeless experiment I can't conceive.'

'I don't know that it is so very hopeless,' rejoined Mr. Lydney.

'I can't fancy it otherwise,' rejoined the other. 'There's not much money to be gathered from a few chance passers-by.'

'Ah, well,' replied the banker; 'old Mercer is making money somehow or other, though I don't pretend to know how.'

The next morning after breakfast Fred Hallaton had arranged in his own mind to pay a visit to the object of his affections; but we are rarely our own masters in other people's houses, and upon this occasion Fred's scheme was quietly knocked on the head by Mary Lydney.

'Now, Mr. Hallaton,' she said, as they rose from the breakfast table, 'if you will get your letters written—that is, if you have any to write—or your cigar smoked if you have not, I shall be ready to go out with you about eleven, and we will take a turn on the sea-wall, and see if we can beat up some recruits for lawn-tennis this afternoon.'

There was no help for it; there was no possibility of backing out of the challenge of his hostess. He could only reply that he had no correspondence to trouble him, and was quite at her disposal whenever she chose, and shortly afterwards he found himself promenading the sea-wall. Miss Lydney, it need be scarcely said, knew pretty well everybody worth knowing in Exmouth. She stopped to chat to several of her friends, and Fred found himself making the acquaintance of half the young ladies in the town. Having enlisted her recruits for the afternoon, Miss

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Lydney turned her steps homewards, and as they walked down the Esplanade for the last time Fred suddenly found himself face to face with Miss Mercer. Sarah was dressed very simply, and in good taste. An amused expression played for a moment over her face as she caught sight of Hallaton, and as they passed she saluted Fred with a malicious smile and bow. He raised his hat, and the next minute became conscious of an extremely surprised expression on his companion's countenance.

'I had no idea, Mr. Hallaton,' she observed, somewhat frigidly, 'that you were acquainted with that lady.'

Fred muttered something confusedly about having been introduced to her in the cricket field, to which Miss Lydney replied a little sharply—'I should have hardly thought that necessary in her case,' and then abruptly changed the subject. Mary, indeed, was very angry; she, of course, knew Sarah very well by sight, and was perfectly aware who the handsome, bold-eyed young woman was. She also knew that she was the daughter of a man of humble origin, who had prospered in Exmouth, made a bit of money, and, after trying his hand at a good many trades, had finally settled down as an innkeeper. Mary would have described Miss Mercer as a forward minx. She had marked the malicious smile that had spread over her face, and rightly considered it was a piece of studied impertinence her bowing to a gentleman with whom she was walking, and deemed that, by returning her salute, Fred Hallaton had abetted Miss Mercer's offence. Fred rose at once to the emergency, and began without delay to talk rapidly on some other subject.

Sarah had been quite as keen to note Miss Lydney's annoyance, and started on her way home with a mixture of anger and triumph in her heart. She was pleased at having mortified 'that stuck-up Miss Lydney,' as she called her, but she did not quite approve of Fred's walking about Exmouth with any one but herself. Not that this had ever happened, for Fred would have fought rather shy at present of parading the town with a young lady in Miss Mercer's position. When she reached her home she found her father and Brent talking in front of the house.

'Do you expect that young soldier chap out to-day?' in-

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quired Joe, idly. 'He wasn't out yesterday, so I suppose it's likely he'll be here to-day?'

'I think not,' replied Sarah, 'for I passed Mr. Hallaton on the Esplanade this morning, and my gentleman seemed half-ashamed to acknowledge me; but I wasn't going to have that, you know.'

'What do you mean?' inquired her father.

'Why, he was walking with that Miss Lydney, who gives herself such airs—whether because she thinks herself good-looking, or because her father is so rich, I don't know. He looked as if he were going to pass me without raising his hat, but I made him such a marked bow he was forced to return it. You should have seen Miss Lydney's face, conceited thing! She can't get a husband herself, and can't bear any young man she knows to look at another girl.'

'Do you mean to say,' said Joe, in rather awestruck tones, 'that you bowed to him while he was walking with Miss Lydney?'

'Of course I did,' replied Sarah. 'You don't suppose I will allow a man to know me in one place and not in another?'

'Quite right,' interposed Brent. 'You are a girl of some spirit, you are. So young Hallaton is intimate with the Lydneys, is he?'

'He knows them,' replied Sarah; 'though I should think that is a thing that doesn't much concern you.'

'Rather a quick-tongued young lady,' remarked Brent, as Sarah swept her way into the house.

'Takes after her mother a bit,' said Joe. 'You'd best speak 'em fair if you want things to go comfortable.'

'Things can't be better than they are,' said Brent. 'As I said before, all that I wish is that we could hit upon some means of getting shot of Tootell, and I own I don't see my way to that.'

'No,' rejoined Joe, sententiously. 'If you keep an inn you can't shut your doors,' and with that the two men turned back into the house.

William Brent was a man who for more than thirty years had been chasing fortune through illicit by-ways, seeking phantasmal riches by various illegal short cuts. If the law had never laid him by the heels it was owing to his

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cunning and good luck, and not because he had not more than once risked falling into its clutches. It could not be said that the police knew him, for that was exactly what they did not. Had they been acquainted with his personality he would not have enjoyed that immunity from the consequences of the nefarious life he had so long led. But if they did not know him by sight they certainly knew of him, and 'Slippery Bill' was chronicled on their records as chief promoter and designer of many a clever scheme for cozening the British public, and wheedling their hard-earned gains out of their pockets. Like all men of his class Brent was a shrewd judge of human nature. A desire to make money with a minimum quantity of labour he knew was characteristic of humanity. We are often reminded that money cannot do everything. 'Perhaps not,' argued Mr. Brent; 'but it can give a good deal, and you can't tell me anything else that can give so much.' His schemes were as varied as ingenious, and as a rule, till the inevitable explosion came, were extremely profitable both for himself and his associates. Some of them, indeed, had expiated their fraudulent proceedings by various terms of imprisonment; but Brent on these occasions invariably disappeared until the hue-and-cry had blown over. What his real name might be nobody knew; he had rejoiced in innumerable aliases, and William Brent was his present travelling-name.

There was one thing singular about the man. His associates were generally lavish of the spoils that fell to their share. Brent was not; he made money and he kept it, and it was probably this possession of ready money which enabled him so often to escape the consequences of his wrong-doing. If he had devoted the same amount of skill and energy to any legitimate calling he would have probably been a far wealthier man. The profits may be great on illicit transactions, but there is always more or less a certain amount of blackmail to be paid by those engaged in them. 'Honour among thieves,' is a very fallacious adage to place trust in, and Brent had more than once paid high to close the compromising mouth of an old associate. Gifted with great coolness and audacity, he had so far borne a charmed life, and was regarded with no

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little awe and veneration by his companions, over whom he ruled with great firmness and authority; but there was amongst them one to whom it was notorious that William Brent yielded a deference he accorded to no one else, and, moreover, that it was certainly not from love that he was so subservient to the ideas of this ancient comrade. Brent was a self-reliant, well-educated man, subtle in his plans, and dictatorial to those concerned with him in their accomplishment; but when old Creasey chose to assert himself—and the violent-tempered old man was much given to doing so—Brent usually yielded. There were various rumours concerning his influence over him, mostly to the effect that he possessed knowledge of Brent's early life that the latter much dreaded to have published; but these were all vague and confused. Certain, however, it was that he yielded to the domineering old man in a way that he did to no one else.

This worthy was at the present moment in prison, where no small period of his life at recurring intervals had been passed.

CHAPTER VII

SARAH'S LOVE-LETTER

'WELL, Mary, what do you think of him?' inquired the banker, as he and his daughter sat *tête-à-tête* at dinner the evening after Fred Hallaton had left them.

'He is a nice, gentlemanly young man,' replied the girl. 'I rather like him; but don't you think it rather odd, papa, that he should know Miss Mercer?'

'No, I can't say I do,' replied Mr. Lydney. 'Miss Mercer is a very good-looking young woman, and I should think by no means difficult to know. I dare say she has a pretty numerous acquaintance amongst the young men here.'

Mary Lydney said no more; she and Hallaton had got on very well together, but she couldn't quite get over that bow upon the Esplanade, although the subject had never been alluded to between them since.

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When two or three days had passed without Fred Hallaton making his appearance at the Dragon, Sarah Mercer began to get somewhat uneasy. Although she did not care for him, she did not wish that this man should escape her toils. It might, or it might not, suit her to marry him, for Miss Mercer went so far as to picture that circumstance as sure to be at her option in due course; but it gratified her vanity to think that she had one of the officers from Exeter dangling in her train; and when three days elapsed, and she still neither saw nor heard of Hallaton, Sarah began to have misgivings. In her experience, and it was by no means circumscribed, she had found that constant interviews were necessary to maintain her thrall. When her admirers, from either accident or design, ceased to see her frequently, they were speedily disenchanted. The fact obtruded itself that, free from the glamour of her splendid and rather sensuous beauty, Miss Mercer was a somewhat vulgar, half-educated young woman, and her first idea had been to treat Fred with considerable hauteur when he should appear. He was to be thoroughly well rated for his neglect, and then forgiven. But, unfortunately for the carrying out of this programme, Fred's presence was necessary, and he still shunned the Dragon. Sarah was naturally a passionate woman, but she could control her temper when she saw good cause for doing so. Fred Hallaton's chains were not quite so tightly riveted as she had deemed them. She changed her tactics, and despatched a short note to the delinquent.

'Why are you angry with poor me?' it ran. 'You might at least come and tell me what I've done wrong.—Ever yours, SARAH.'

Could Fred Hallaton but have seen the sullen, angry face that bent over the paper as those few words were penned, it might have saved him much future misery. Fred, indeed, on his side, was not a little wrath with the fair Sarah himself. He knew, as well as Miss Lydney, that the salute on the Esplanade had been given with *malice prepense*, and it angered him that Sarah had deliberately placed him in such an awkward situation. But Fred was too deeply smitten to nurse his indignation for long. He was already once more meditating a call at the

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Dragon when Sarah's note was put into his hands, and, it need scarcely be said, that effectually clinched his resolve.

He was received with much cordiality. Sarah's face flushed with downright pleasure at the success of her stratagem. She honestly was excessively glad to see him again. She had missed his adulation. It was a necessity to this girl that some man should be always pouring honeyed words into her ear. Even her father was pleased to see the young fellow again. As we know, Joe Mercer had somewhat ambitious aspirations for his daughter, and muttered to himself, 'He would do, if he'd take a fancy to her, as Sam 'ud say. Gentlemen don't come shinning round every day.'

'Now, Mr. Hallaton,' exclaimed Sarah, 'I will take you to see old Bob Mutter if you like, and you can hear from his own lips all that he has got to tell about the old inn.'

'I think I'd rather hear it from you than from him.' rejoined Fred, with an ardent glance at his enslaver. 'Let us have one more look at the old ball-room before you begin.'

Sarah laughed, and rejoined, 'Well, with you to protect me, I don't mind; but I honestly don't care about going there by myself. It gives me the creeps—but come along,' and she led the way.

On arriving at the door, she turned the handle, and then said, 'I can't open it.'

'It's a little stiff from disuse,' suggested Fred, 'let me try.'

She stood back while he essayed to open the door. He turned the handle sharply, and gave it a good jerk, and then remarked, 'No wonder we can't get in. It is locked.'

'I wonder what that's for,' exclaimed Sarah. 'Wait a minute, I'll go and ask father for the key.'

They accordingly wended their way back again, and found Joe Mercer and Brent talking together in the bar parlour.

'We want to have a look at the old ball-room, father, and somebody has locked it up. Have you the key?'

Joe Mercer and Brent exchanged a rapid glance.

'Yes. but it is upstairs,' responded the former, after a

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short pause. 'I have locked it up because the floor is not safe.'

'Why, father,' exclaimed the girl, 'we went in there the other day. The room was dusty and ghostly enough, but there wasn't a board even creaked under us.'

'What the devil are you doing here, sir?' suddenly inquired Brent, so fiercely that the other three looked round in utter amazement to see what had produced this explosion.

Standing in the doorway, with both ears unmistakably cocked, was Mr. Tootell. If ever a man had curiosity limned in every line of his face, if ever a man was listening to a conversation of absorbing interest, it was Mr. Tootell at that moment.

'What am I doing?' he replied, in answer to Brent's question. 'I have just dropped in for a tankard of mild ale, and to see how my old friend is. Ah! Mr. Hallaton, I hope I see you well, sir. No cause to ask after you, Miss Mercer; you look blooming.'

Miss Mercer responded by an indignant shrug of her shoulders, while Hallaton returned the old gossip's greeting with a contemptuous stare.

'By the way, Joe, you never told me about the old ball-room. I'd like to see it. That reminds me, I've never been thoroughly over the old house yet.'

'Well, then, you can't see the old ball-room to-day, that's all I have got to say,' replied Mercer. 'In my mind the old ball-room is unsafe. I've locked it up, and I'm not a-goin' to open it for any one. I'm not a-goin' to have any broken legs lying about my premises.'

'Well, Mr. Mercer,' said Hallaton, laughing, 'I don't think there'll be much risk of that; but if you don't want us to go into the room, of course that's sufficient.'

'No, no, tut, tut,' exclaimed Tootell, 'you young gentlemen are always so hasty. I'm very anxious to see that ball-room. I don't mind even if there is a little danger. To think now, Joe, that you never mentioned that ball-room to me before!'

'I'm sorry I can't oblige you, Mr. Hallaton, but I stick to what I say. I thought it best to lock that room up, and locked I intend to keep it.'

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'Quite right, Joe, quite right,' said Mr. Tootell, as Sarah and her admirer quitted the parlour; 'not the thing to let foolish young people like that go exploring by themselves. But now they're gone you and I'll just go and have a look at that floor by ourselves. Might be something to be made of that room, Joe, who knows? We might get up a free-and-easy there. I'm rather a card, you know, in that way, and I'm sure I'd be always ready to oblige.'

Brent cast a meaning look at Joe Mercer, and then left the room.

'Odd thing,' remarked Mr. Tootell; 'that man always reminds me of some one I used to know long ago.'

'Who might that be?' asked the other, uneasily.

'That's just what I can't call to mind; but it's some one I knew before I came here, I fancy. It puts a man out not being able to think of a thing like this,' said Mr. Tootell, meditatively. 'Now, Joe, what about that ball-room?'

'We'd best have this thing made clear at once,' said Mercer, angrily. 'I keep a house of entertainment in which there are certain rooms set apart for the public; the remainder of the house I intend to keep for myself. If the public rooms ain't enough for you, you'd best go somewhere else for your liquor.'

'No, no, Joe,' replied Tootell. 'I'm not a-goin' to desert an old friend like that; but it's impossible for me to advise you without looking over the premises, you know.'

'Advise me,' cried Joe, 'what about? Who the dickens asked your advice?'

'Now don't get hasty,' replied Mr. Tootell; 'of course I thought you were asking my opinion about doing the house up a bit.'

'Then you had best understand,' retorted the landlord of the Dragon, 'that I don't want your opinion about that or anything else,' with which sweeping disclaimer of any assistance Mercer left his guest to finish his ale by himself.

The idea of a sort of Bluebeard's cupboard in the Dragon roused Mr. Tootell's curiosity to a feverish height. He felt that he must see the inside of this locked room. What reason had Mercer for keeping it shut up? That its being unsafe was a mere excuse was palpable, and while he drank

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his ale Mr. Tootell's busy brain was lost in vain conjecture as to what might be the secret of this carefully guarded chamber, and how he was to obtain a peep into it. He had not lived in Exmouth all these years without having heard of the ball-room and the ancient glories of the Dragon, but it had never occurred to him till that morning that the ball-room was still in existence. He knew that a considerable part of the house was shut up, but had never before felt the slightest curiosity about these empty unfurnished rooms. But now there was a mystery about them, he felt he should never rest till it was solved. He wondered whether it was possible to get a peep in at the windows of the mystic chamber. The Dragon was built like a T, of which the top faced the road, while the tail ran back into the garden, and on which the windows of the ball-room opened. Mr. Tootell knew enough of the house to know that this tail of the T was the disused part, and that of course in that was the room into which he was so anxious to penetrate.

Mr. Tootell finished his ale, and was about to take his way home again, when he suddenly bethought him that it was worth while to take a turn round the garden and see what he could make out at the back of the house. It was a large old-fashioned garden, by no means carefully kept, and in which there had never been the slightest attempt to conform to the modern fashion of groups of small beds in intricate patterns, with trim narrow borders of lobelia, golden chain, or other similar plants. The large grass-plot in the centre was surrounded by various shrubberies with great deep borders in front of them, in which the flowers grew in wild luxuriance and looked almost as if they had been sown broadcast. It was evidently but very roughly cared for, and even Tootell could see that in the hands of any one who had a real love for a garden it had great capabilities. Prying about and making diligent use of his eyes, Mr. Tootell had little trouble in making out to his own satisfaction which were the windows of the ball-room. Those three tall windows, of which the centre one ran down to the ground and was flanked on each side by a bay window, stopping just short enough of the walk outside to allow for a seat in each, pointed unmistakably to the object of Mr.

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Tootell's quest, but it required only a glance to see that they were boarded up on the inside, and that therefore, as he reflected ruefully, there was no opportunity for making a peephole unless the glass was first broken. Mr. Tootell's further researches were suddenly stopped short by a significant cough, and it was beautiful to see then how absorbed he at once became in the cabbage-roses, the view, or anything else indeed except the old ball-room.

'What!' said Brent, as he advanced with a mocking smile on his lips, 'as you couldn't see the inside you thought you would come and look at the out. Well, that's it, and now I hope you're satisfied.'

'Very interesting indeed,' replied Mr. Tootell; 'I can quite fancy it being a most excellent room for the purpose. Dancing inside, then people stepped out by the window and doubtless had refreshments of all kinds. I tell you what,' continued Mr. Tootell, 'if the landlord in those days knew his business, he had lots of little tables and chairs all over that grass-plot.'

'And if the landlord of these knew his business, he would allow no prying old fools about his premises,' with which far from flattering observation Mr. Brent turned sharply on his heel and made his way round to the front of the house, where the landlord of the Dragon stood, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and apparently buried in deep thought.

'It's devilish unlucky, Mercer, that that inquisitive old idiot should have overheard your daughter ask for the key of the ball-room. By the way, I told you the other day somebody had been in there.'

'Why, what's the matter now?' inquired Joe.

'He's gone pottering round to the garden to have a look at the house on that side; he has made out the ball-room, and he'll never rest till he gets a peep at it.'

'Well,' said Joe, with a chuckle, 'if as much as he can see through the windows will content him, he is welcome. I saw to the boarding-up of those windows myself, and I'm blessed if there's a chink to put an eye to. No, no, he'll do us no harm that way, and I'll take good care he never has the key. But I'll tell you one thing that looks queer; he says you remind him of some one he met long ago.'

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'No! did he say that?' inquired Brent, eagerly

'Yes; says he can't recollect who, but thinks it was some one he knew before he ever came to Exmouth.'

Brent drew a breath of relief. 'Then it's all right,' he exclaimed; 'but, of course, I might have known it was, he never did know me in Exmouth. I had left it before he came here.'

As Mr. Tootell walked back to the town again he muttered, 'That Mr. Brent is so rude, it's extraordinary I do not recollect him.'

But Tootell was used to such rebuffs, and was often wont to remark to himself, with a sigh, 'There ain't no politeness left in this world.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE WARNING

THE weeks slipped by. Exmouth had never been gayer than it was that summer. Garden parties, tennis tournaments, cricket matches, water picnics, and dances followed each other in rapid succession. Plenty was also going on in Exeter, and the revels in both places were attended by the people of each town. Fred Hallaton threw himself into the fun going on round him with all the life and vigour that characterised his nature. In the ball-room, in front of the nets, or in front of the wickets he threw himself into the pastime of the hour, heart and soul. He was by no means a bad fellow, but he was apt to pursue the pleasure of the moment without counting the cost, and at the present time was playing a game that has often brought infinite tribulation to the player. He was paying marked attention to one woman, while he was madly in love with another.

Mary Lydney was no foolish sentimental young woman to let her heart go out of her keeping at the first few courtesies that a man might pay to her. She had had two disappointments, the latter of which she had borne with becoming resignation, but the first had been a very different matter. Her heartstrings had been sore wrung about that

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first love affair; for a long time she had not known how it was that her betrothed had suddenly left her. But persistent questioning forced from her father the humiliating fact that her *fiancé* had broken off his engagement because he could come to no satisfactory arrangement in money matters with Mr. Lydney. What particular point he had taken umbrage at she had never cared to inquire. She felt sure that her father would be most liberal in his offer of settlements, and she flushed with indignation when she thought that this man, who had professed to love her so dearly, had loved not herself but her money. As her father's only daughter she supposed that some of these days she should not only be very well off, but that her father would make her a handsome allowance if he approved of her choice, and she thought that the man whose requirements in this respect her father had failed to satisfy must be indeed greedy of gold. She liked Hallaton, and could not help being aware that he paid her marked attention, but she was not likely to let her heart go lightly out of her own keeping a second time. Then, moreover, she knew of his acquaintance with 'that very objectionable Miss Mercer,' and she often wondered whether he saw anything of that young lady now. She had never asked him; they had tacitly agreed that that fair damsel was never to be the subject of their discourse.

Strangely enough, Sarah was equally curious to know if Fred saw much of Miss Lydney; but Hallaton sternly repressed all inquiries in that direction, and imperious as the girl was, and great as was her power over him, she found her lover, too, had a temper of his own, and, strange to say, she liked him all the better for it. Sarah Mercer had been so accustomed to rule her swains right royally that it interested her to have a man at her feet whom she could not quite deal with as she pleased. That society generally had noticed how attentive the young artillery-man was to Mary Lydney it is needless to say, and also that society waggled its head and whispered that all was arranged between Mr. Hallaton and the banker's daughter. Some of those dear elderly ladies to whom a past scandal is a thing preserved, but never buried, whispered ominously that the thing had happened twice before, that Mary had

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no difficulty in getting engaged, but in her case that never seemed to lead to a wedding.

As for Dicky Chives, when the rumour first met his ears, he put down his pipe, and said gravely, and in awe-struck tones, 'Is this true, you fellows? I don't go gadding about, you know; but has he gone too far to be saved, because if he hasn't I'll speak to him?'

But his comrades generally replied that Hallaton was making uncommon strong running if he didn't mean it, and that if he was not engaged yet he was as good as. On hearing which Dicky resumed his *brûle gueule*, puffed a heavy cloud of smoke from under his moustache, and grimly ejaculated, 'There's another good man gone wrong.'

Dicky consequently never said anything to Fred concerning this rumour. He hated to see his chums marry, because he knew that they then became lost to him in that capacity. It was not that the better halves of some of these lost sheep had not striven to make their houses pleasant to their husbands' old friend, the difficulty was with Dicky himself; he got on very well with ladies, once induced to mingle with them, and indeed would have been rather a favourite with them, if he could only have been persuaded to go more frequently amongst them; but, to use his own expression, he 'shied at a petticoat.' It must have been, I suppose, the mental strain required for the making of small-talk, for he was a man to whom, except in the matter of tobacco, a lady's presence imposed no very unaccustomed restraint. If Chives had asked Fred whether he was going to marry Miss Lydney, that gentleman would probably have told Dicky not to be a fool. 'I visit a good deal at their house at Exmouth; it's all rot to think just because a man is a little civil to the daughter of the house that he is thinking about marrying her,' and at the present moment it was probable that Fred had never taken thought to himself of what would be the end of either of his love affairs.

Yet with all the gaiety he was mixed up in, Hallaton found time somehow to pay many a visit to the old Dragon Inn. He made a flimsy pretext of a passion for hearing these smuggling legends, and had even been taken by Sarah to see old Bob Mutter. He had made that veteran

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happy by a largesse of silver and tobacco, and endured, as he laughingly remarked, two or three stupendous lies from the lips of that drunken old sailor. But, for the most part, he sought his information from Miss Mercer's own pretty mouth, to which his own at times got in closer proximity than strict etiquette warranted.

'I can't think,' said Sarah, as she walked lovingly with Fred Hallaton in the garden one autumn afternoon, 'what father's fad is about that old ball-room. He keeps it most jealously locked; as for its being unsafe, that's all moonshine.'

'It doesn't much matter,' replied Hallaton. 'It is only an old man's whim, I fancy. It may be that your father has got it into his head that some of the lumber and old furniture we saw there is valuable.'

'I sleep a good way from it,' replied Sarah, 'but sometimes I hear strange noises that sound as if they came from the old room. I told mother so the other day, and remarked that if the ghosts of the old smugglers had come back, they must have come in very substantial form!'

'And what did Mrs. Mercer say?'

'Nearly snapped my nose off,' replied the girl, laughing. 'Told me I was old enough to know better, and that she would trouble me to hold my tongue, and not go talking about such things; adding, "If you go gabbling about ghosts I shall have the girls afraid to move about the house now the days are drawing in." Father and Mr. Brent, too, are quite touchy about any allusion to that room.'

'I can't see what Mr. Brent has to do with it,' said Hallaton, 'any more than I can see what on earth he is doing here. By the way, what does he do here?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' replied Sarah; 'he goes out very little, and never, to my knowledge, into Exmouth. He seems to spend most of his time talking to father.'

Hallaton here turned the conversation into more personal channels. His question had been asked from very idleness, for what Mr. Brent's business might be at the Dragon was a thing in which he felt no interest.

Inside the bar-parlour it was evident that something unusual had occurred to disturb the usually tranquil con-

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versation that went on between Joe Mercer and his guest.

'This letter is serious,' exclaimed Brent. 'That inquisitive chattering magpie Tootell was bad enough; but even if he did succeed in recollecting me, although it would be awkward, still there could be no such consequences as would happen in this case.'

'Read the letter again,' replied Mercer, sententiously.

'Letter,' returned the other; 'it's only a line from one of my most trusted confederates, a man who has been in a good many big things with me. He don't say much, but Jim can say a good deal in a few words. There's nothing more than this—"Mind yourselves; Creasey is out." And if he had said the Devil is unchained I shouldn't have considered it more serious.'

'Well, I can't quite understand it,' said Mercer. 'To begin with, who is Creasey, and what is he out of?'

'Out of prison, curse him! Creasey is the bane of my existence, the millstone that has been round my neck all my life. But for Creasey,' continued Brent passionately, 'I might have been something very different. I've never stooped to be the mere vulgar bandit that Creasey is—a man who has adopted burglary as his calling.'

Carried away by his own tempestuous feelings, Brent did not notice his companion's countenance, but suddenly his eye fell upon Joe's awestruck face, and, pausing, he said with a laugh, 'Do I frighten you, old man?'

'I knew nothing about Creasey,' was the reply. 'You never told me you were mixed up with people of that sort; and what is the use of calling things by such ugly names? I don't hold with robbery, mind you.'

'Ah! you don't,' said Brent; 'pray what do you call our present business?'

'Well, it is smart trading, if you must talk about it,' said Joe. 'I get all the produce I can off the farm, and sell it at the best market.'

Brent burst into a fit of laughter. 'Now,' continued Joe, 'what about Creasey? Not that I've any desire to make his acquaintance, but how can he interfere with us? Does he know you're here?'

'No; but he will,' rejoined Brent; 'as I tell you,

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there's no shaking him off. He'd find me if I was in the midst of the Australian bush. He always does, except he's locked up.'

'Well, what does he want, when he has found you?'

'Money,' said the other; 'but that's not the worst of it. He'll want to know what I'm doing, and, worse still, to have a hand in it.'

'Oh, Lord!' said Joe; 'and then I suppose that he'll blow the gaff?'

'No; to do Creasey justice, he's not that sort quite, but he is just as bad. Out of his own business he's the stupidest chap I know. Give him a centre-bit, a jemmy, a pair of goloshes, and a box of safety matches, and I believe he is clever; but for anything that requires headwork and combination he is a hopeless dunderhead. He has spoilt three or four of the best things I ever planned—not that he has "rounded" intentionally; he has let the cat out of the bag from sheer stupidity.'

'But can't you give him money, and beg him to go away for the present?'

'You don't know him,' said Brent. 'The obstinate old man claims to have a great liking for me. Go! Not he. He'd settle down close to us, break into a house once a week just to keep his hand in, and finally "crack" the Dragon some night, just to see what "his dear boy," as he calls me, is about.'

'Then what do you propose to do?' said Joe. 'I told you the other day I wished I'd never gone on with it. I should have liked to back out of it even then; but now that we are making money so fast, I own I should like to risk it a little longer.'

'What we must do is this,' replied Brent; 'as soon as Creasey makes his appearance—and appear he will, as sure as fate, though at present he neither knows my address nor the name I'm going under—we must stop the concern, and I must make a clean bolt of it abroad.'

'Why abroad?' inquired Joe Mercer.

'Simply because that's the only place where I've a chance of shaking off Creasey. Foreign towns confuse him, and, moreover, the foreign police are lynx-eyed. Creasey

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is never long on the continent before he disappears into retirement.'

'And then?' said Mercer.

'It'll be time to think what then when I've shaken off my incubus,' and with these words Brent suddenly vanished down the passage in the direction of the ball-room.

Joe Mercer had most clearly expressed his feelings in his conversation with Brent. He had been very loth to go into a business which he knew placed him within the trammels of the law. Hard bargains he had driven, and very close to the wind had he sailed again and again in his dealings; some of his doings could by no means morally be condoned, although legally no man could interfere with him. At first he had sternly declined this affair as too risky; but Brent was a plausible man, and painted in glowing terms the enormous profits he had made by the same scheme two years before. 'It burst up suddenly,' concluded Brent, 'and we all had to quit and travel at short notice, but we made a pile of money at the game while it lasted.'

This story, oft repeated into Joe's avid ears, added to the suggestion that the old Dragon Inn was the very place for their purpose, and on offer at a very low rent, at last induced Mercer to embark on the speculation. For once his greed for gold got the better of his habitual prudence, and the landlord of the Dragon found himself the possessor of a thriving business, but a business which brooked no investigation.

CHAPTER IX

DICKY'S EYES ARE OPENED

ALTHOUGH Mr. Chives had no taste for balls and picnics, and regarded lawn-tennis with tolerant contempt, yet he was a most energetic man concerning all matters of sport, and always running about the country to play cricket, to shoot, fish, or to perhaps ride a horse at some local meeting. Nothing came amiss to Dicky of this kind, and even rat-

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catching met with favour in his eyes. These manifold pursuits brought Chivy, as he was often called by his intimates, in contact with a large and varied circle, and wherever he was quartered the number of gentlemen of all degrees who called at the barracks to see him was the cause of much chaff among his brother-officers.

His servant was constantly pursuing him with 'Gentleman, please, to see you, sir,' and whether the gentleman was interested in rats or politics, whether he was member for the borough or the landlord of a sporting tavern, who had simply called in to give Dicky 'the office' that there would be parlour field sports at his little place, was generally an open question. Let him be stationed where he would, Mr. Chives and his brace of terriers, which their proprietor proudly boasted would face any living thing, were sure speedily to be well-known figures in the town. Fuss and Fidget were a couple of broken-haired terriers, quite as restless as their master, and contributed not a little to his notoriety. They apparently believed their sole mission on earth was the destruction of vermin, and that they were taken out walking for no other purpose. A mistaken idea on their part that the killing of cats was laudable had more than once got Mr. Chives into hot water. What nad brought that ubiquitous gentleman over to Exmouth this fine autumn day is of no moment, but seven o'clock saw him sitting down to what threatened to be a solitary dinner at the Beacon, when suddenly to his great delight a tall, florid, stalwart man entered the coffee-room, and after greeting him warmly volunteered to join him in his meal.

Doctor Nicholls was a man much of Dicky's own kidney, and they had met many times and in many places in pursuit of their favourite pastimes. How Nicholls had acquired the sobriquet of 'The Doctor,' to which his position as a veterinary surgeon by no means entitled him, I don't know, but as such he was well known for many a mile round Exmouth. 'The Doctor' was a busy man, but contrived to combine business with pleasure by dint of untiring energy. He was here, there, and everywhere, and there was little that went on either in the town or about it but what came to his ears. Not that he was given to gossip—far from it.

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His talk was chiefly of dogs and horses, and such scandal as escaped his lips was chiefly equine.

'Well, Mr. Chives, how goes it?' he exclaimed, as he took his seat opposite him. 'Having settled over the Leger, it's getting time to lose more money in trying to pick the winners of the two big back end handicaps. Have you got a fancy?'

'No. I spotted the winner of the Cesarewitch five years ago, and lose a few pounds every year in endeavouring to do it again.'

'We must try and do better for you this time. D'ye know Sam Mercer?'

'No; never heard of him. Who's he?' inquired Chives.

'Never heard of him? Well, that's queer, too, considering Mr. Hallaton's a great pal of yours. However, no matter; Sam's a great pal of mine, and is as clever a man as there is in the ring. He generally gives me a hint worth following towards the finish of the piece, and if he don't, why then it's not good enough to touch. What's the news at the barracks? Fuss and Fidget been in mischief lately? Any old woman's best mouser missing?'

'No,' rejoined Chives, 'the "quads" are all right; the mischief's amongst the bipeds. Fred Hallaton's gone wrong.'

'Why, what's the matter?' asked the doctor, with no little astonishment.

'He's going to be married,' replied Dicky, so solemnly that the last dread formula of a sentence to death might have been expected to follow. 'However, it's a good thing for him, I suppose. Miss Lydney will have a pot of money, I'm told.'

'Very likely,' rejoined the Doctor; 'but that won't matter to Mr. Hallaton.'

'Oh, won't it, rather. You don't suppose a subaltern of Horse Artillery is a millionaire, do you?'

'No; but your chum's not going to marry Miss Lydney—at least, I'll lay liberal odds against it.'

'Why, everyone's talking of it, I'm told,' said Chives. 'It's as good as given out. The banns are up, so to speak.'

'Yes, I know all about that, but what about the other? Why, Mr. Hallaton's always out at the Dragon. Her brother's a great friend of mine, but I've no liking for Sarah

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Mercer, and the man who takes her for better or worse may make up his mind to do with the latter.'

'What the deuce are you talking about, and who on earth are these Mercers?' inquired Chives.

'Why, you saw that handsome girl Hallaton was walking about with when you played at Exmouth? That was Sarah Mercer; her father keeps the old Dragon Inn just outside the town.'

'And you think Fred's after her?' said Chives, much surprised at this double complication.

'Don't know what he goes out to that tumble-down place for, if he isn't,' replied the doctor; 'but he'd better be careful; he's playing with a tigercat when he's fooling with Sarah Mercer.'

Mr. Chives had much respect for the doctor's opinion. A man of his knowledge concerning horses and dogs he thought must be an equally good judge of womankind, and he came rapidly to the conclusion that Fred Hallaton was in a fair way to make an egregious ass of himself. This young misogynist, however, knew his hot-headed chum too well to think that he could do any good by interfering.

'If Hallaton must marry,' he remarked at length, 'I suppose Miss Lydney would be a good match for him, though why a fellow can't let well alone I can't think.'

'Yes, I should think so,' observed the doctor, 'and if you mean would it be better than running away with Sarah Mercer—infinitely. Lydney was born to, and has always held, a high position in the place, and, judging by appearances, is well off.'

'And no near relations, bar his daughter, to leave his money to,' remarked Chives, suddenly developing mercenary propensities.

'About having no near kith and kin, I wouldn't be so sure,' rejoined the doctor. 'Lydney undoubtedly had a younger brother who disappeared abruptly from Exmouth under a cloud. I don't know exactly what it was, for I was only a boy at the time. He has never been seen or heard of in the place since. But then, again, he has never been said to have died. If anything happened to the banker, I shouldn't be surprised to see him turn up again.'

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'Ah! and you think he might share in Miss Lydney's inheritance?'

'Oh, I'm sure I don't know,' replied the doctor, laughing; 'but hang it, that's enough of this. If we are to go in for speculation, let's talk over the weights of the Cesarewitch.'

'It's getting time I was off,' said Chives, as he took a cigar from his case, and rose from the table.

'Ah, going back to Exeter, I suppose. I'll walk down to the station with you. I want to persuade you to come with me to Newmarket next week.'

'If I can get away,' replied Chives, 'I don't mind if I do. You are going for the whole week, I suppose?'

'No, business won't allow of that. We'll run up from here on the Monday, have Tuesday and Wednesday at Newmarket, and be back here again on the Thursday.'

'Write it down, old man,' said Chives. 'If the chief'll let me, I'm on,' and with that he disappeared into the train.

'A good sort that,' mused the doctor, as he walked slowly away. 'I'm glad I told him what I did at dinner. If ever a young man wanted a word in season, it's Hallaton just now. I don't know whether he's a man who'll bear talking to, but I should think if any one could warn him that he is in a fair way to make a fool of himself, it's Chives. They're great allies, and Chives is a little the elder of the two. However, I've done all I can, and it's no particular business of mine, after all,' and with this the doctor dismissed the subject from his mind and betook himself to his own abode.

The object of all this solicitude was, however, not one whit disturbed about his doings or their results. He had spent the afternoon, with great satisfaction to himself, at the Dragon, where he had pursued his flirtation with the fair Sarah more hotly than ever. He had dined at mess, and was now playing a rubber with apparently no care on his mind save the winning of the odd trick, and yet for all that he had found two or three disagreeable letters upon his table on his return from Exmouth: one from his bankers calling attention to the fact that his account was considerably overdrawn. He had not been racing since Goodwood, but it was by no means necessary to attend races in order to bet upon them, and the ill-luck Fred had experienced at Goodwood had stuck to him ever since. He had struck one of those

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veins of ill-luck familiar to all who gamble; he could do nothing right. Even when it really did look as if fortune was within his grasp, his fancy at the eleventh hour succumbed to the exigencies of training. On two occasions also did he encounter that bitterest of misfortunes known to the backer of horses—his selections won, but were disqualified, the one for foul riding, in the other case for the omission of a penalty. Then there was a jeweller's bill, which also astonished him not a little, as bills of that nature are wont to do.

He was not given to jewellery himself, but Miss Mercer had developed a very pretty taste that way, and Fred was one of those careless young men who scarcely note the cost of a bangle, or such like knick-knacks. 'Well,' he had said to himself as he dressed for mess, 'I suppose luck will turn some day. However, at present there's nothing for it but to have another dig into capital. I must sell some more of those railway shares. I can buy in again, at a slight difference no doubt, when I make a *coup*.'

Alas! that *coup* so seldom comes; and if it does we very rarely buy in again!

Fred Hallaton played a pretty good rubber at whist; he had a liking for cards, and had assiduously cultivated all games thereat in which skill tells; but, though a fair performer, he had one fatal weakness—he never adhered steadfastly to the same points. The consequence was, after a very successful run at the conventional garrison points, he would probably experience just the reverse when playing at his London club for very much higher stakes. To-night he was holding great cards, and had just triumphantly called 'Three by cards and two by honours; out, treble, double, and the rub,' as Chives entered the room.

'Halloa, Dick!' he exclaimed; 'what wickedness have you been up to all day?'

'I've been over to Exmouth,' replied Chives. 'Never you mind what about. Perhaps I was buying a horse; perhaps I was trying a dog; and then again, perhaps I wasn't.'

'And perhaps you don't want to tell, and perhaps we don't want to know,' retorted Hallaton, laughing. 'Still, if I was so downright ashamed of myself, I'd fudge up some excuse to cover my misdeeds.'

'Ah,' replied Chives, 'my wickedness hasn't been very

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great. I shouldn't wonder if it brings its own punishment all the same. I dined at the Beacon with Dr. Nicholls, and I've agreed to go with him to Newmarket if I can get away. I suppose, Thornton,' he continued, turning to the adjutant, 'there won't be any trouble about that for four days?'

'I should think not. We'll see about it to-morrow.'

'Going to Newmarket, are you?' said Hallaton. 'I've a great mind to come too.'

'You'd better put that idea on one side,' said Thornton, 'I'm sure the chief won't let you both go.'

'Rather a bore that,' returned Hallaton. 'And Dicky has got decidedly first call. I say, Chivey, when you go over to your quarters I'll go with you.'

'All right,' replied the other, 'I'm going there now,' and the pair left the room together.

'Now,' said Hallaton, 'as I can't go to Newmarket, I shall want you to do something for me. I've been having an awful bad time lately. It set in a hailstorm at Goodwood, and it has been blowing great guns ever since. I can't turn a trick, and I'm a terrible lot out in the last three months.'

'Give it up, man,' replied Chives; 'it is no use persistently following your bad luck.'

'You're quite right, but I've a chance now, Dicky, to get a bit back, I think. I got a line to-night from the cleverest tout I know, and he tells me that Sugar Cane will about win the Cesarewitch.'

'Of course I'll back her for you,' said Chives; 'but answer me one question. Why don't you back her yourself?'

'For the best of all possible reasons, I'm warned not to do so till the day. This man tells me that the mare belongs to a very queer party, and, if they can't get their own money on satisfactorily, she'll not run at all. Her performances are not very great, but he tells me I needn't take any notice of that. She is a very much better mare than she is credited with being, and has got wonderfully well in.'

'Well,' said Chives, who had been turning over the pages of a turf guide, 'her performances are not very gaudy, certainly.'

'No; but, for all that, the public have been nibbling at her, at 40 to 1. If her number goes up put me a hundred on her.'

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'I say, that's a lot of money to knock down; don't you think a pony will do?'

'Not a bit of use,' replied the other; 'if I don't land a good stake I must sell out shares of some kind or another. A hundred won't make any difference while I'm about it.'

'All right, old man, I'll do it; though I won't promise to follow your tip—nor, I am afraid, will you take warning by mine. Now, Fred, I heard all about your visits to the old Dragon Inn to-day. Don't be angry with me, and don't ask who my informant is, but this is what I was told. You'd better play with a tiger-cat than make love to Miss Mercer.'

'Nicholls—for I suppose he was your informant—was d——d impertinent to comment on my actions. It was like his confounded impudence to pry into my private affairs,' said Hallaton, hotly.

'That'll do; no need to flare up,' rejoined Chives. 'I've said my say, and you'll hear never another word from me about Miss Mercer. Now, let's talk racing.'

CHAPTER X

THE SWEETS OF THE SUGAR CANE

Mr. Chives, having obtained his leave, started, as agreed, on the Monday with the doctor, and duly arrived at Newmarket, if too late for the day's racing, still in excellent time for dinner. Chives was very fond of a bit of racing when it came in his way, entering with the keenest zest into the sport of the thing; but his speculations were on a modest scale, and not wont to occasion him much anxiety when they proved unsuccessful. He usually put as many five-pound notes as he could conveniently lay his hands on into his breast-pocket, and, in his own vernacular, when he had 'punted' them all away he stopped. It was not his first visit to the metropolis of the Turf, but for all that he was not learned in Newmarket. As for the doctor, he was an old *habitué*. He had been a racegoer for upwards

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of thirty years, and was well versed in all the intricacies of the running ground, whether Across the Flat, the Rowley Mile, or the Cesarewitch Course, &c. He knew them all. Dinner over, he proposed that they should stroll down to the rooms and see what was doing. Plenty of speculation was going on there about the big race on the following day, and Chives and the doctor looked on, much amused at the stirring scene before them.

Suddenly Chives was startled by the cry of 'What'll anybody lay me against Sugar Cane?' He turned sharply to the direction from which the voice proceeded, and saw a quietly dressed man, who was leaning upon a crutch-handled stick.

'Here's forty hundreds Sugar Cane,' was the quick response. The first speaker simply nodded as he took out his betting-book, and then observed laconically, as he pencilled the bet, 'I'll do it again.'

'Here's thirty to one Sugar Cane,' roared another speculator.

'Done in hundreds,' quietly remarked the man with the crutch-stick; 'monkeys if you like.'

'No, thank you, Mr. Roach,' replied the professional who had laid the last bet.

Inquiries after Sugar Cane became now pretty numerous. It was obvious that several backers had followed the inspiration of Mr. Roach, and the price against the mare shortened rapidly.

'By Jove,' thought Chives, 'for once I do believe Fred really has got hold of a good thing. Sugar Cane looks like becoming a hot favourite,' he observed, turning to the doctor.

'Don't know anything about her,' replied that worthy. 'So little indeed that I forget whether she is ever run, but the confederacy to which she belongs are dead sharps, and that man Roach, who "put her up," and backed her to night, very often does commissions for that stable. However, I've had about enough of this, and feel a bit tired after the day's travelling; besides, every one at Newmarket gets up early.'

So the two strolled out of the rooms and made their way leisurely up the High Street in the direction of their

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lodgings. They were lounging along, when suddenly from a narrow by-street on their left came a half-stifled cry of 'Help!' Both men turned sharply round, and the doctor suddenly exclaimed, 'Come on, Chives! By God! there's a pack of roughs have got a man down, and are robbing him.'

In the centre of the narrow street one man was kneeling on another, while his three companions were endeavouring to rifle the pockets of their victim, who, though unable any longer to cry for assistance, from the fierce grip on his throat, still struggled manfully with his assailants. The doctor dashed in boldly at the robbers, but these latter were by no means disposed to let their prey escape them. Pausing in their work of plunder three of them fiercely confronted the new comers, and with awful maledictions bade them go about their business.

The doctor might not possess much science, but he was a powerful man for his years, and grit to the backbone. He was not to be cowed by curses, and went boldly in at the foremost of his antagonists. But in Dicky Chives he had a most valuable ally. Though low in stature, Dicky was broad in shoulder, rather bull-necked, and in chest like a Highland bull. He not only possessed great strength, but was an exceptionally good man with his hands; and his quiet 'All right, doctor, wire in; I can lick a couple of such trash as this in no time,' struck no little awe to the hearts of the two ruffians who were confronting him. The observation, too, was followed up by some half-dozen blows straight from the shoulder, which, as the doctor laughingly remarked after the fray was over, resembled the kicks of a horse more than the application of man's natural weapons.

Like all ruffians of this sort the robbers were arrant curs at bottom, with little stomach for hard fighting. The battle was of short duration, two or three minutes, and the gang took to their heels, and as the attacked man struggled breathless to his feet the doctor exclaimed, 'Sam Mercer, by all that's fortunate! We would have been glad to do any one such a turn, of course; but I'm real glad, Sam, we were in time to pull you out of the fire.'

'Reckon you're right, doctor,' gasped Mercer; 'the tarnation skunks had pretty near fixed me. Ugh! ugh!'

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he continued, still choking a bit, 'if I had only been up in time to have one kick at that bushwhacker who was hanging on to my windpipe!'

'Sure you're none the worse?' inquired the doctor.

'Nary worse,' replied Sam; 'the thieves only took my wind. I managed to hang on to the flimsies. Haven't the pleasure of knowing you, sir,' continued Sam, turning to Chives; 'but I'm awfully grateful for your assistance. Guess we've got to have a drink over this as soon as possible;' and with that the bookmaker led the way up the High Street.

Sam Mercer's lodgings were no very great distance from their own, but the doctor declined Sam's proffered hospitality, said it was getting late, and they would all be the better for a good night's rest.

'Don't you be afraid about the drinks, old man; we'll find time to wash our mouths out with you to-morrow—at Jarvis's, perhaps, when we've got the Seizerwitch off our minds. Good-night.' And with hearty hand-grips the three men separated.

* * * * * * *

A grand October day, when the crisp air seems to act like wine on the system—one of those bright clear days when, if striding through the turnips with the first crackle of frost on them, one feels all over like 'killing,' or if on Newmarket Heath like backing winners—a day that seems to augur success to whatever we have undertaken; but on a racecourse there are always gathered the two opposing armies, and the battle must go against one side, be it the backers or the fielders. The small preliminary race that precedes the *cheval de bataille* of the Second October Week has just been run, and is followed by the slight lull which takes place before the hoisting of the numbers for the Cesarewitch. Standing against the rails of Tattersall's ring are two men who have apparently met for the first time that day.

'Well, Sam,' said the bookmaker who had laid Mr. Roach the odds against Sugar Cane the previous night, 'I'm glad to see you looking all yourself. It was all over the town this morning that you'd been rushed by a lot of

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rowdies on your way home from the Rooms, and robbed, and half murdered.'

'Not quite so bad as that,' rejoined Mercer, 'but that was about the programme, if a friend of mine had not stepped in and spoilt it. But you had no end of a game on at the Rooms after I left, hadn't you, over Sugar Cane? What's it all mean?'

'Well,' replied the other, 'it beats me. I *did* think I knew something about that one, and when Crutch Roach first put her up I thought it was only to make a market, and laid him forty hundreds, but I soon found it was a genuine commission. He often does them for that stable, you know. Bless your soul, before half an hour was over, people were tumbling over one another to get on the good thing. The mare looked like becoming a red-hot favourite, when, just as the rush was at its height, Captain Figg quietly exclaimed, "Here's ten thousand to a thousand Sugar Cane or any part of it." We all stared, for you know what Figg is; when he begins to lay 'em in that way they're as good as dead; but perhaps the most puzzled man of the whole lot was Crutch Roach. He evidently couldn't understand it. However, he shot the captain for ten monkeys, and then the duel began in earnest, but the captain never flinched; he tired out Roach and all Sugar Cane's other supporters, and finally drove her back to 25 to one—no takers.'

'It's a queer start,' said Sam, 'and a question of who knows most. Neither of 'em make many mistakes, nor are likely to have bet as they did without direct information. However, here go the numbers,' and Sam commenced ticking them off on his race-card. 'Sugar Cane goes, at all events, and there's pretty certain to be a move either for or against her now,' and so saying Sam Mercer plunged into the throng in the exercise of his calling.

He had been for some minutes vociferating the odds, booking bets, and holding mysterious confabulation with his brethren, when he was suddenly touched upon the shoulder, and on turning round found himself confronted by Dicky Chives.

'What can I do for you, sir?' inquired Sam.

'What price Sugar Cane?' inquired Dicky.

'They are taking twenty to one,' replied Mercer.

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'All right, I've a commission to back her. Will you lay me twenties?'

'Certainly, Mr. Chives. What shall I put it down to? Ten pounds or more?'

'I want to back her for a hundred,' replied Dicky.

Mercer hesitated for a minute or so, as if thinking, and then said, 'You're not backing it for yourself, sir?'

'Certainly not,' replied Chives; 'I never bet in such sums as that.'

'Very good,' said Sam; 'then I'll lay you two thousand to a hundred,' and having pencilled the bet the bookmaker again started off on his vociferous career.

'Well,' thought Chives, as he walked away to seek some place from which to see the race run, 'I don't know whether Mr. Mercer doubts my stability, but it struck me he was rather unwilling to bet with me.' But in this he did Sam a great injustice. Sam Mercer was not the man to forget what a good turn Chives had done him the night before. He did not know positively, but from what he had seen during the last few minutes, he had come to the conclusion that there was something not right with Sugar Cane. A bookmaker cannot afford to indulge in sentiment, but, had not Chives so clearly said he was backing the mare for somebody else, Mercer would have strongly advised him to leave it alone. He could not have explained what it was all about, but he had been far too long in his profession not to understand the signs of the market. Crutch Roach was silent to-day, and it was evident that the backers of Sugar Cane were chiefly composed of the general public, while, ominous sign, Captain Figg and three or four of the most astute operators in the Ring seemed to have endless money to bet against the mare.

However, the roar of the bookmakers is hushed at last, and the cry from the stand proclaims 'they're off.' Chives, who has regained the fly which he and the Doctor have chartered for the day, stands up on the seat, and adjusts his race-glasses. As the horses pass through the gap, Chives descries the green-and-white hoops of the mare well in the van. 'Sugar Cane is going well,' he observed quietly to the Doctor.

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'Why, you haven't backed that one, surely?' exclaimed Nicholl.

'Not for myself, but I have for Hallaton.'

'Much?' inquired the Doctor, laconically.

'A hundred,' replied Chives, with equal brevity.

'Money thrown away,' replied his companion; 'I'll tell you all about it afterwards. It's as rascally a business as that precious confederacy ever indulged in.'

With the details of the race we have nothing to do. The running of the only horse which bears upon this history—Sugar Cane—may be briefly described. After lying in front for about three-quarters of a mile, she dropped unaccountably in the rear, and some distance from home her jockey ceased to persevere with her, and she finished quite at the tail of the ruck.

'Sorry for Fred,' muttered Mr. Chives, as he closed his glasses. 'I'm afraid from what he said that he is rather in a hole about money matters, and this afternoon's work isn't calculated to improve things,' and then it struck Dicky Chives as rather singular that Hallaton's hundred had gone into the pocket of Sarah Mercer's brother. Of course, it made no difference whether he took the odds about Sugar Cane from Sam Mercer or any other bookmaker, the result would have been the same; but, if the Doctor was at all right in his estimate of the young lady, the Mercer family seemed destined to be very unfortunate acquaintances for Fred Hallaton.

'Now, Doctor,' he said at length, 'tell me what you heard about the mare before she started.'

'That she was likely to run pretty much as she did. It seems that Gregory, one of the two confederates, had a trial while Carver, the other, was away from home, and that the mare failed to accomplish what she was asked. In his anxiety to save the money for which he had backed her he gave Captain Figg a heavy laying commission, without saying a word to Crutch Roach, who was backing it for the stable, and who, he was dreadfully afraid, would begin by saving his own money before he began looking after that of his employers. This all leaked out about an hour ago, and I'm told that there will be a very pretty row between Messrs. Roach, Gregory, and Carver to wind up with. Well, I hope

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we shall do better over the Middle Park Plate to-morrow, for I've had a bad race over the Cesarewitch.'

'Yes, and besides Hallaton's money there's a modest tenner which has been reft from the house of Chives, and which must if possible be recovered to-morrow.'

CHAPTER XI

'WAS IT A WIG?'

ALTHOUGH Mr. Tootell was thick-skinned, still he had his feelings. It took, no doubt, a good deal to get down to them, but they were there, although they might not lie near the surface; and the more Mr. Tootell pondered on it, the more confirmed he was in his opinion that he had been treated with scant courtesy on his last visit to the Dragon. He determined to abstain from visiting that hostelry, and in his self-conceit thought that this would be a severe deprivation for Joe Mercer.

'I'm sorry for Joe,' he muttered to himself; 'he'll miss my daily budget of news sadly; but when it comes to calling people "inquisitive idiots," it's coming it rather too strong. It's time such language was at once pronounced unparliamentary, and that is where Joe failed. He allowed such language to pass, without taking any notice of it. No; I'm sorry, but I must give Joe up. One can't frequent a house which contains a Blue Beard chamber, and where you're called an inquisitive idiot for wanting to know what's in it.'

But if Mr. Tootell deemed that he was punishing the landlord of the Dragon, he was inflicting agonies on himself. What there might be, or what went on, in that mysterious ball-room haunted his mind day and night; he pictured to himself the most preposterous scenes by turns. Sometimes the skeleton in the cupboard was a veritable one, then his imagination depicted that the room was full of treasures, that old Joe had in some mysterious way discovered that there was a walled-up cellar, which contained all kinds of laces, velvets, wine, &c., a buried legacy from the smugglers

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who had haunted the house in days of yore. Yes, that would account for Joe Mercer's taking the Dragon. He had somehow discovered the secret that all these valuable goods were contained within its walls, and was now busy moving them surreptitiously away, so that his landlord might not lay claim to what was clearly more his property than any one else's. In short, there was no end to the romances which Mr. Tootell built up for himself about the Dragon and the locked-up ball-room. Three days had elapsed, and then the old talemonger could stand it no longer; he felt that he really must go out and see how things were going with the Mercers. If he could not solve the mystery of the Dragon, he could, at all events, keep an eye upon that little flirtation of young Hallaton's. He was taking two or three turns on the esplanade preparatory to starting for the country, when his attention was attracted by a grey-haired old gentleman, who was slowly sauntering up and down the sea-wall. That he had never seen the old gentleman before was quite enough for Tootell. Who was he? and what was he doing in Exmouth? were two questions that a strange face invariably aroused in his mind.

The grey-haired gentleman had apparently plenty of time on his hands. He sauntered along in most indolent fashion, and constantly paused to admire the view and inhale great gulps of the strong sea-breeze. Presently he seated himself on one of the benches, and to one of Mr. Tootell's inquiring mind this was an opportunity not to be resisted. Taking a seat beside the stranger, he ventured the remark that it was a lovely morning.

'Yes,' was the reply; 'it's years since I saw it last, but Exmouth is still what I have always remembered it, a sweetly pretty place.'

'Ah! knew it of old, did you, now?' said Mr. Tootell. 'Now what might be your idea, sir, of *years*?'

'Thirty odd; time enough to have made great changes in the place, as no doubt it has in the people.'

'Ah! that was before I came here. I suppose you had a large acquaintance when you were here before?'

'Not very,' replied the stranger; 'I was only here a short time. Are Lydney & Sons, the bankers, still to the fore?'

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'There have been no sons in the house,' replied Mr. Tootell, 'since I've been in Exmouth. It's Lydney & Daughter, although they don't write it on their cheque-books. Did you happen to know them Mr. —— ? Johnson I think you said your name was ?'

The stranger smiled as he bent his head. 'I was acquainted with one of them. By the way, there was a famous inn in these parts in those days. I don't suppose it exists now—probably been pulled down to make way for a fashionable hotel.'

'Not a bit of it,' rejoined Tootell. 'The Beacon—of course, you mean the Beacon—is as flourishing as ever. Bless you, I ought to know, I was in the "public" line myself once; kept the White Stag here for years.'

'No,' said the stranger quietly, as soon as it was possible to interrupt the other's loquacity; 'the inn I mean stood about a mile outside Exmouth. It was a celebrated house; I can't recollect the name.'

'Not the Dragon,' exclaimed Mr. Tootell, his eyes very nearly starting out of his head with excitement. 'It wasn't the Dragon, Mr. Johnson, was it ?'

'That's it,' replied the stranger; 'the Dragon.'

'Why, that has been taken by an old friend of my own, old Joe Mercer; but he isn't doing much good with it; he won't be guided by me, or else he would start a little gathering there every week—call it the "Sons of Harmony," or some such name. It would be attractive, and draw custom. People like a little music with their liquids—leastways that's my experience. Got the very room for it, and all. You recollect the old ball-room there ?'

'Can't say I do,' replied the stranger. 'I only stayed there for two or three nights, and recollect very little about the place.'

'Ah! then I've no doubt you would like to see it. I'm going out there now. If you like to walk out with me, I'll ask old Joe to show it us.'

'You're very good,' replied the stranger, rising, 'and some other time I shall be very proud. Just now I must go back to my lodgings. Good morning, sir.'

'Good morning,' replied Tootell. 'Don't forget to give

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my old friend Joe a turn. It's a nice walk, and you get a good glass of ale at the end of it. A good fellow is old Joe, but obstinate, damned obstinate!'

'Now,' said Mr. Tootell to himself, as the stranger walked away, 'I do wonder who he is. Very suspicious, the way he behaved about his name. Never said honestly his name was Johnson. And what on earth could he have wanted at the Dragon Inn all those years ago?'—a misty speculation that could only have occurred to a man of Tootell's insatiable curiosity. However, he regarded this as a still further reason for delaying his visit to the Mercers no longer; he was disappointed that he had failed to persuade the stranger to accompany him. In his cunning, Mr. Tootell had thought of making a cat's-paw of his new acquaintance, and instigating him to ask for a sight of the mysterious chamber. That being out of the question, he must now trust solely to his own efforts.

On arrival at the Dragon, somewhat to his dismay, Mr. Tootell found himself received by Mrs. Mercer. She and Brent were engaged in an animated conversation, and there was evidently considerable difference between them. At the sight of Tootell their tongues at once stopped, and Mrs. Mercer greeted him with a somewhat uncourteous 'Good morning.' As for Brent, he took no notice of the visitor, but smoked on in solemn silence. To a man like Tootell this was irritating past endurance. He was a man to whom 'talk' was a necessity, and conversation, from his point of view, usually took the form of asking questions. Mrs. Mercer speedily left the parlour, while the exasperating brevity of Brent's replies to the interrogatories Mr. Tootell put to him were, in that gentleman's opinion, simply sickening. As he said afterwards, the fellow *wouldn't* know anything. Again the thought flashed across Tootell that the man's face was not altogether strange to him, and then all at once a new idea struck him. It was capitally done, and was calculated almost to defy scrutiny, but was this man Brent wearing his own hair? Was it a wig, or was it not? Mr. Tootell, bear it in mind, from his histrionic tastes had considerable knowledge of making-up for the stage, and after staring intently at Brent for some minutes arrived at the conclusion that it was a wig. In spite of the contempt

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he usually manifested for him, Tootell's prolonged scrutiny seemed to make Brent uncomfortable.

Rising from his chair, he exclaimed with forced jocularity, 'If you want to stare at me, old gentleman, I expect you to pay for it.' With that he strolled out of the parlour, leaving Tootell more impressed than ever with the idea that he (Brent) was wearing a wig, and much perplexed as to by what stratagem the said wig was to be got off its wearer's head. Clear up these two points he felt he must; a peep into Bluebeard's chamber he must have, and to see what manner of man was disguised under that wig was likewise necessary to his happiness; but how to compass either of these things he was completely nonplussed.

At this juncture Joe Mercer entered the parlour, and he welcomed Tootell in more kindly fashion than the others had done.

'Well, Joe,' said Mr. Tootell, 'I've come over to have a little chat with you. I've been thinking over that little scheme of ours—a little harmony once a week, you know. Suppose we go and have a look at the room?'

'Now, once for all, understand that room's locked, and it ain't a-goin' to be unlocked. I can manage my own business without any assistance from you.'

'Well, well, I'm sure I don't want to interfere, but they do say——'

'Who's they?' interrupted Joe, sharply.

'Oh, I don't know exactly. People will talk, you know. However, never mind, Joe, I've got a new customer for you. I met a nice old gentleman on the Esplanade this morning who knew Exmouth years ago. He asked particularly after the old Dragon Inn. I told him all about it, and said he'd get as good a glass of stingo here as anywhere about Exmouth.'

'Did he ask for me by name?'

'No, Joe, he did not, and that's the truth. His own name was Johnson—that is, he didn't say it wasn't. He is probably come to stay some time in these parts. I daresay he would be more comfortable with you than where he is. I'll see about it for you.'

'Don't you trouble yourself,' rejoined Mercer. 'We

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don't care about any more boarders. The missis don't care about having so much cooking going on.'

'That Brent seems to stick to you. By the way, you haven't found out what he's doing down here?' remarked Mr. Tootell, confidentially.

'Never mind about Brent,' replied Mercer. 'What about this stranger who inquired for the Dragon? What aged man was he?'

'About your own age. It's singular he should recollect anything about the Dragon. Why, you can't remember it in its famous days, can you, Joe?'

'No; I've heard of 'em. But they were over before my time. Nobody, I reckon, remembers them, except old Bob Mutter.'

'It is odd, now you mention it, that a stranger to Exmouth should ever have known of the old Dragon Inn,' remarked Tootell. 'I must ask him how it came about the next time I see him,' and, seeing no further chance of clearing up either of the two mysteries which disturbed him, the old gossip rose to depart, resolved to make diligent pursuit of this fresh hare that had crossed his path.

On Brent's return to the room Mercer told him Tootell's story, remarking that it was certainly rather singular that a stranger's main recollection of Exmouth should be the old Dragon Inn.

For a few minutes Brent sat musing. 'Yes,' he replied at last, 'I can't understand that. I can't cipher it out. From the description I shouldn't be much surprised if the stranger is Creasey. How that man always contrives to find me out I can't tell, but he does. I should not have thought that he had ever even heard of the Dragon, nor am I even aware that he knows anything about this part of the country. At times I think he knows my real name, but he has never said so positively.'

'I don't suppose it is Creasey,' replied the other. 'That Tootell always makes a great fuss about any one until he finds out who he is. Blessed if I don't think he is always afraid of overlooking an Emperor in disguise.'

'It's all very well,' said Brent, 'to think I am skeary about Creasey, but I should like to have a look at this stranger, without his seeing me. As I told you the other

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day, if it is Creasey, it's all up with our business; he will insist upon joining in it and bring us to grief, as he always does; he is too unlucky, not to say too careless, a confederate to trust in any game; add to which he is so terribly well known. Why, they have got his photograph in every prison and leading police station in England.'

'Yes,' said Mercer decisively, 'if that fellow has found you out we must give it up. I've never run such a risk before, and I never will again.'

'And you never made so much money before.'

'No,' replied Joe; 'and if we can carry on for a twelve-month more, and get out scot-free, I'll not say it hasn't been worth running.'

'We must keep a sharp look-out,' rejoined Brent; 'and, as a precaution, I must endeavour to have a look at this stranger.'

In pursuance of this resolve Mr. William Brent relaxed from his usual habit of avoiding Exmouth, and commenced taking an occasional constitutional on the Esplanade. At war with the laws of his country as he had been from his youth up, he considered that he owed his immunity from chastisement in great measure to the strict concealment of his identity; whatever the nefarious scheme he might be engaged in he invariably adopted a disguise of some sort, and he was famous among his confederates for his dexterity in making-up. The victims of his frauds would have often been dumbfounded if they could have seen the real man in place of the cleverly disguised swindler who had outwitted them. The good fortune that had so far attended him was perhaps making him too daring in his schemes, but his audacity never occasioned him to neglect the slightest precaution nor to run unnecessary risk. He did not like Mr. Tootell's visits to the Dragon, but he could not see how to prevent them.

For the first time it had struck him that morning that Mr. Tootell had suspected his disguise. In such tortuous paths as he was accustomed to tread, a quick eye and a good memory for faces were essential, and he not only recognised Tootell, but had recalled to mind where he had met him. He did not want Tootell to recognise him, but reflected that if it came to the worst Mr. Tootell could allege nothing against

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him beyond that he used to frequent the tavern in London of which he, Tootell, was then the proprietor, in company with men of rather dubious character.

CHAPTER XII

'TAKE ME WITH YOU'

'I SUPPOSE we shall lose you now very soon, Mr. Hallaton,' observed Miss Lydney, as she paced by his side up and down the Esplanade. 'You officers always go away about this time.'

'Yes, I'm off in a week or so, and I'm sorry for it; but one must be attentive to one's relations, you know, and I rejoice in an uncle who is a perfect martinet upon that point. He was in the service himself, so that he knows perfectly well the time at which long leave commences. I shall have to spend a month with Sir Robert in Kent. However, there's one thing, the fun here is pretty nearly over; but what a jolly season it has been, has it not?'

'Very,' replied Mary; 'but that's rather a selfish remark on your part. The fun is over, and you're going away. Have you no sympathy for us who are left behind?'

'You can't think I shall forget the many friends I've made here—and least of all Miss Lydney.'

'Oh, I don't know about that!' replied the young lady, laughing. 'I daresay you'll have forgotten all about us long before you come back.'

'You can't think that of me,' rejoined Hallaton. 'You know I couldn't if I would.'

'I think you're talking great nonsense,' replied Mary. 'If rumour may be trusted, you'll perhaps not forget one person here, but that is neither me nor any lady of my acquaintance.'

'I don't understand you,' stammered Fred, but his face too clearly showed that he did, although he had never dreamt that his constant visits to the Dragon had of late become quite common gossip in Exmouth. That, as one

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whom it to some extent concerned, the rumour should be slow to reach Miss Lydney's ears was only natural, but it had at length, and she had heard it with no little indignation. She felt that it was likely to be true, and she was very angry that Fred Hallaton should have dared to put such an affront upon her. His attentions to her had been most decidedly marked, and that he should presume under those circumstances to carry on a low intrigue with a girl like Sarah Mercer was a positive insult. She felt the more indignant on discovering that the liking she had always had for him had ripened into something warmer; if she was not in love with him, she was drifting into something very like it, and this intelligence opened her eyes to the fact. Her first impulse was to take care never to see him again; but she was a proud, sensitive girl, and on consideration thought it would excite less remark if she broke off their intimacy by degrees. She was aware that he was going away before long, and that would facilitate their lapsing into a distant acquaintance. She would probably never have opened her lips to him on the subject had he refrained from love-making on this their last walk, for, although Fred Hallaton did not know it, Mary had determined if possible it should be that.

There was silence between them for two or three minutes. Fred Hallaton was not often taken aback, but for once he had nothing to say. Miss Lydney was the first to speak.

'I am not,' she remarked, 'given to credit all the idle gossip that comes to my ears; but on this occasion I can vouch that you do know this young woman, and it is somewhat to my astonishment that you find her attractive. Of course, your intimacies I have no wish to comment on; but to talk sentiment to me, when you are notoriously paying your attentions to another woman—and *such* a woman—is simply an insult.'

'But believe me——' began Hallaton.

'*You*,' she interrupted contemptuously; then suddenly recovering herself, 'it's getting cold,' she continued, 'and I shall go in. I will not trouble you any further, Mr. Hallaton; we'll part here,' and with a haughty bow Mary Lydney dismissed him.

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As Fred Hallaton walked back towards the railway station, he reflected ruefully, as many of us have often done, that he was in for a bad time. The world was running askew with him just now, and when that is the case it makes it no better that the broth is of our own brewing. Men who gamble cannot be always successful, and the old adage, 'It's well to be off with the old love before you are on with the new,' is doubtless the result of bitter experience.

'Serve me right,' he muttered. 'Hang it all. I just feel as pitiful a cur as ever crawled. By Jove! she was far too good a girl to treat in that fashion. How she did flash out! Who could have dreamt of pretty Mary Lydney's eyes lightening like that? Who could have told her about Sarah?'

Because the Dragon was little frequented, and that by a class inferior to his own, Fred Hallaton fell into the mistake of supposing that his visits there escaped observation. It was not likely. He forgot that Sarah had often accompanied him back to the outskirts of the town, and, though he might not have been seen on the Esplanade with her, plenty of Exmouth people had seen them walking together. That Sarah Mercer was carrying on with one of the young officers from Exeter, and giving herself more airs than ever in consequence, was the subject of much talk amongst her old friends and acquaintances. Mr. Tootell also was not the man to refrain from commenting freely on what he saw at the Dragon, so that one way and the other Fred Hallaton's affair with Sarah Mercer was quite as much discussed amongst the middle-class people of Exmouth as his flirtation with Miss Lydney was amongst those of his own station. Mary was not given to gossiping with servants, but she had been quite unable to stop her own maid's loquacity when that young person first became aware of Mr. Hallaton's iniquities.

Fred began at last to think he had made a precious muddle of his affairs generally. Did he want to marry Miss Lydney? No, he was not clear about that. She was a sweet girl, by whose side it was very pleasant to saunter through a summer afternoon; but marriage was another thing, and yet he knew he had given her to suppose he had

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that end in view. But if he did not want to marry her, still less did he wish to quarrel with her, and he knew that henceforth he could expect nothing but the coldest salutation from Miss Lydney; nor was it likely that he would ever make his peace with her again. Sarah Mercer was superbly handsome, but then he certainly did not contemplate making her his wife, and he did not quite see how that flirtation would end. Once or twice he had resolved to see her no more, but his infatuation was too strong, and again and again he returned to drink of the Circean draught. Do not believe that a man cannot be for a little while in love with two women at the same time. Hallaton was genuinely in love both with Mary Lydney and Joe Mercer's daughter, but his love for the first was of a higher order than that which he conceived for the latter. Had Sarah Mercer not crossed his path it is quite possible he might by this time have resolved to win the banker's daughter, if he had not already done so; but Sarah intoxicated him, and, as she gave him every encouragement, he had not the strength of mind to break her thrall.

'It's well,' he muttered to himself as the train bore him along the line to Exeter, 'that I am going on leave. My affairs seem in a devil of a mess all round. Miss Lydney has taken things into her own hands and dismissed me. Whatever chance I might have had of winning her I have lost by my own folly. As for Sarah, I am half sorry I ever saw her; I'll wish her good-bye and have done with it, and when I come back from leave make a stern resolve not to cross the threshold of the Dragon. I'm rather foolish even to say "Good-bye," I believe, but I can't help it. I must see her once more! Then, I'm rather in a scrape about money matters. There's another hundred gone over that brute "Sugar Cane." Dipping into capital is a very good game while it lasts, but the worst of it is it don't last long. Let's see, this is Wednesday, and Chives has wired for one day's extra leave, and so won't be back till Friday. I have no doubt they will give me leave to go that day without waiting for his appearance. Dick is always true to time. I'll go and bid Sarah good-bye to-morrow, and be off by the evening mail next day.'

By the time Hallaton had arranged his programme to

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his entire satisfaction, the train had reached the station, and Fred made the best of his way to the Barracks.

He had made no mystery of his approaching departure. There was no reason he should; most of his friends—just as Miss Lydney did—knew that he was going away in a few days on two months' leave, but there was one place in which Fred had instinctively felt that it would be better not to mention it, and that was at the Dragon. He felt that it was likely to be productive of a scene if Sarah should discover that he was going to part from her for so long, and yet there was something too pitiful in sneaking away without avowing it; and as he took his way into Exmouth the next morning he had quite determined that he would bid Sarah farewell, and explain to her that it was best they should say good-bye to one another for good. But, though he was unaware of it, the news had already reached Miss Mercer's ears, and, though ignorant of the precise day, she did know that her lover was going to leave Exeter for a time, and Miss Mercer was very determined that something definite should be settled between them before he went. She felt tolerably sure that he would not go away without seeing her, but she was beginning to feel extremely uneasy about it when Fred made his appearance.

The girl advanced to meet him, all radiant with smiles, and Hallaton thought he had never seen her look handsomer than she appeared that morning, as, clad in her close-fitting dark serge dress, which showed off the superb figure to perfection, she stood in the porch of the old inn awaiting him.

'I began to think that you had clean forgotten me,' she exclaimed, with the pretence of a pout, as she adjusted the gay cherry ribbon at her throat. 'I haven't seen you for three whole days, and now I hear that you're about to leave Exeter.'

'Only for a time,' he replied, as he drew her towards him and kissed her.

'Ah, you men!' she said, as she gently disengaged herself from his embrace. 'You call it only for a time, and you're away months; don't you know that days are months when one loves, and you have taught me to do that, Fred.'

Hallaton winced; he felt guiltily conscious that he had

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been making desperate love to this girl almost from the day he first met her; no doubt she had been willing enough to meet him halfway, but it did flash across Fred that she was doing a great deal more than that now, and that this 'good-bye' would be difficult to say, more especially if, steadfast to his resolution, he persisted in making it final. It is not so easy to tell a passionate, sensuous, young woman, who has just answered your kiss with a frank confession of her love, that you have come to say farewell, and break off all relations with her. One thing was clear to him, namely, that the porch was rather too public for so tender an interview as this promised to be.

'Come round to the garden,' he said; 'I want to have a long talk with you.'

They took their way to the large garden, which ran round the ball-room at the back of the house, and where they had paced up and down many an afternoon during the past summer.

'I have been in a fever,' said Sarah, 'ever since I first heard you were going away. I thought you were never coming again. Ah, I did you injustice! I might have known you would never leave me like that.'

'I'm going away,' he said, 'a little sooner than I expected; but how came you to know I was going at all?'

'That wretched old Tootell told me,' replied the girl, with an angry flash of her eyes; 'and the spiteful old thing quite giggled when he did so. He hates me as much as I hate him. He only told me to make me mad, and he did.'

'What did you say to him, Sarah?'

'Oh, never mind what I said to him; he won't like me any the better for it; but tell me about yourself first. How long are you going away for?'

'About two months,' he rejoined.

'Two months, and I am not to see you for two whole months—two long months! Oh, Fred, if you cared half as much about me as you pretend to do, you could never bear to leave me for all that time.' She was not really in love with him, in spite of all the passion she was displaying; but he did please her fancy, and it flattered her vanity to have a gentleman at her feet. She had made up her

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mind to marry him if she could, and she did not like the idea of parting from him for so long.

'It can't be helped,' he replied, soothingly. 'I have relations whom I'm bound to go and see occasionally.'

'But you will write, write constantly, won't you?'

'Yes, my darling,' replied Fred, once more caressing her.

It was weak; he knew it was. If he were determined to put an end to this affair, to open a correspondence with her was the most imprudent thing he could do.

A glow of conscious triumph filled her heart, and she felt that this man was given into her hands. They walked up and down for some time exchanging those many nothings that enter into the composition of all love-making. Every art that she possessed the practised coquette exerted to win him. She was tender and passionate by turns, and Hallaton, intoxicated by her charms, felt his resolutions melting like wax, and when the time came to say good-bye he felt it was impossible to tell her that he looked upon their parting as final.

'When do you go?' she murmured, as the last words were exchanged between them. 'I shall see you once more, shan't I?'

'No, dear, this is good-bye. I go by the night mail to-morrow night.'

'Take me with you,' she cried, as she threw her arms round his neck. 'I can't bear it; I can't live without you,' and, his resolutions scattered to the winds in the delirium of the moment, Fred Hallaton consented.

CHAPTER XIII

'SOONER OR LATER SHE'LL MARRY HIM'

If Mr. Brent had for reasons of his own commenced to take his exercise on the Esplanade at Exmouth, yet he did it in a fashion peculiar to himself. He did not pace up and down that fashionable promenade after the manner of its habitués,

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but generally slunk along on the side of the carriage way farthest removed from the sea; but, for all that, his restless eyes took note of all the passers-by that strolled up and down the causeway. The fourth morning he espied Mr. Tootell in close conversation with another man, and this he had a shrewd suspicion was the object of his search. This probably was that old gentleman of whom Tootell had spoken, and whom Brent suspected of being his bugbear Creasey. Many of us are afflicted with our Old Man of the Sea, that terrible friend or relation whom it is impossible to shake off, and it is gratifying to think that the criminal classes are no more exempt from this infliction than their neighbours. He was too far off to be perfectly sure whether it was Creasey or not, although he felt quite sure about Tootell; and yet to approach nearer would be dangerous. And should Tootell catch sight of him, that garrulous old gentleman would be sure to salute him and so call his companion's attention to it. Brent was most decidedly anxious to see if this was Creasey, but he was equally desirous to keep Creasey in ignorance of his own presence. Brent was a man of resource. Dogging the couple at a considerable distance, he kept them in view till he ran across what he wanted.

One has not to go far to seek a man with a telescope by the seaside at any watering-place, and as soon as he encountered one, Brent borrowed his glass, and in two minutes had ascertained that his suspicions were well founded. Tootell and his companion had turned towards Brent. Another steady stare through the telescope, and he handed the glass back to its owner. It was Creasey; and Brent, as he hurried away, felt no doubt in his mind that Creasey had come down to Exmouth in search of him.

'It's wonderful,' he muttered to himself, 'how impossible it is to shake off that old man. I left, as I believed, no clue behind me when I came down here on this business, and here he is again, not only on my trail, but very close to the end of it. It would be absurd to suppose that now he has got hold of that talkative old fool he will be more than a day or two in discovering me.'

Brent, as we shall see later on, was to some extent mistaken. He was perfectly right about its being Creasey, but

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he was wrong in thinking that illustrious malefactor's business in Exmouth was to discover him. Mr. Creasey had come down there on some private business of his own, though should he stumble across Brent he would doubtless desire to dip into his purse as in days of yore.

Brent made the best of his way back to the Dragon, and at once communicated to Joe Mercer his discovery.

'It's no use, Mercer,' he said, 'I shall have to be off. Of course, it don't matter for a day or two; it would take him some little time to find out our game, but it will be only a matter of time; we shall never keep him out of the house. It's a great pity just as we're coining money at it to have to give it up. There's only one thing, Creasey knows nothing of you; don't you think you could manage to run the thing alone—that is, without me?'

'I don't know,' replied Joe, 'but I do know that I'm not going to try. It's a pity, for, as you say, we're doing well at it; but it's too risky.'

Then ensued a long discussion between the two men, and finally it was arranged that their nefarious vocation should still go on, at all events until Mr. Creasey appeared at the Dragon. In short, although they had not confided in one another, the Mercer family were all prepared to decamp without beat of drum. Little was seen of Fred Hallaton by his brother officers the day after what was to have been that final interview with Sarah. He was busy, indeed, making all his preparations for what he practically knew might prove a very lengthened absence indeed. In the madness of his passion, he had promised Sarah to take her away with him, and what the end of that was to be was a thing he rather shrank from contemplating. He had settled to travel by the night mail to town, and had arranged with Sarah that she was to meet him at Exeter Station. He thought it would be prudent not to dine at mess, for fear that some of his brother officers might volunteer to accompany him to the station, and he was certainly not anxious to advertise the fact of his having a *compagnon de voyage* to all Exeter. He would have something to eat quietly at the Rougemont, and then kill the time as best he could until the train started.

In his anxiety to leave Exeter without attracting at-

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tention, Fred Hallaton had resolved to start a few hours before his leave actually commenced. He confided his intentions to no one, and therefore his brother officers, if they did trouble their heads about it, would not imagine that he would start till the next morning. Now, it so happened that there was a train down from London which reached Exeter just ten minutes before the train he proposed to travel by left that city. Had he dined at mess he would have known that Dicky Chives was expected back at that time, and that consequently it was very probable that he would run across him at the station. Things had mended very much with that gentleman on the Wednesday at Newmarket; he had backed several winners, the sport had been generally good, and he confided to the Doctor that he had thoroughly enjoyed himself, to which that gentleman drily responded, 'Winning in fine weather on a racecourse is about the most exhilarating thing that I know of.' It was the morning of their final day at Newmarket, and seeing Sam Mercer in front of the rooms, Chives went up to him, saying, 'I don't belong to Tattersall's, and therefore always settle on the racecourse. I owe you a hundred pounds over the Cesarewitch. As I told you, I wasn't backing Sugar Cane for myself, but you won't mind taking my friend's cheque, I hope.'

'Not at all, sir,' said Sam; 'that'll be right enough, I've no doubt.' As he looked at it he suddenly ejaculated 'Mr. Hallaton! It was for him you backed the mare, then?'

'Yes,' rejoined Chives, 'do you know him?'

'Oh, yes,' replied Mercer, 'I've done business with him. We had a bet or two together at Goodwood. He don't seem in luck's way. I suppose you mean to see the week out, sir?'

'No,' replied Chives; 'I'm off to-day.'

'Good-bye, then,' said the bookmaker; 'I daresay we shall meet again. I owe you a good turn, Mr. Chives, and if ever I can pay it, I will, you bet.'

'Well,' was the laughing reply, 'I think you might have told me that Sugar Cane was no good the other day.'

'Look here, sir,' said Sam Mercer, earnestly; 'I asked you particularly if it was for yourself, didn't I?'

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'You did,' said Chives.

'Very good; you can't expect me to look after all the babbies there are about on a racecourse. Besides, these infants ain't so innocent always. They often know quite as much as we do, and a bit over; all betting resolves itself into a case of who knows most. Guess I'd like to shake hands with you if you're not too proud. You're *white right through*, and no mistake.'

Chives smiled as he shook hands, although perhaps Sam Mercer's final compliment he hardly comprehended, and shortly afterwards was making the best of his way back to the west country.

As the train rushed merrily through the night air on its way to Exeter Chives fell to thinking a good deal about Fred Hallaton; that he was very much embarrassed about money matters, he knew. They were bad enough, but it is possible to be involved in considerably worse troubles than those. Fred had an uncle who, if he chose, could give him very substantial help in that way.

'It's a deuced good thing he's going away; it's the only thing that will save him, if I may rely on the Doctor's story, from a hopeless entanglement with Sarah Mercer. If he marries her—well, a marriage of that sort always produces an awful row amongst all your relations; besides everybody will know the whole story—they'll be tabooed everywhere they go. Sam Mercer is, no doubt, a very good sort of man in his way, but he'd be a little awkward as a brother-in-law,' and then turning round, he confided the subject of his meditation to his friend the Doctor. The latter listened patiently, and then sat silent for some minutes.

'You want to know what I think about it,' he said at last. 'That's soon told. I know Sarah Mercer a little, but I know a great deal more about her. She has an imperious, domineering temper, but she can be very fascinating to most men when she chooses. My idea is that unless she chooses, he'll never get rid of her, and that sooner or later she'll marry him, whether she goes off with him first or not. If you think you can interfere with any advantage you had better do so, but my experience of interference in such cases is that it generally does more harm than good; and now, I'm going to sleep.'

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No further conversation passed between the pair till they reached Exeter. Having secured their portmanteaux, they were making their way out when Chives suddenly exclaimed, as a tall young lady hurried past them in the direction of the bridge which leads to the up platform, 'What a good-looking girl!'

'She is very handsome. You don't mean to say you didn't recognise her?'

'Well, I ought to recollect her, but don't,' replied Dicky.

'Why, that's the young woman we've been talking about. That is Sarah Mercer,' and the two men paused for a moment to look after her.

'It's very odd,' observed the Doctor. 'What the devil can she want over on the up platform? She ought to be travelling back to Exmouth with me. However, she's an independent young woman, and her vagaries are nothing to me. And now I'll say good-bye; you're off to barracks, of course.'

'Yes. Good-bye, old man,' replied Chives; 'it's been a very pleasant outing, hasn't it?' and with that Dicky jumped into a cab and was driven rapidly homewards.

Having put his traps in his quarters, he walked across to Hallaton's, but there was no answer to his knock, and no light in the room.

'I shall find him over at the mess, I suppose,' and so saying, Mr. Chives betook himself across to that establishment in pursuit, to use his own expression, of 'a bite and a sup.' However, when he reached it, although there were plenty of men therein assembled, yet the man he was looking for was not amongst them. After shaking hands and satisfying his hunger, Chives asked what had become of Hallaton.

'Can't tell you. I'm sure he didn't dine at mess, and nobody has seen him all the afternoon.'

'Spending his last night over at Exmouth, perhaps,' said one of the others. 'He goes on leave to-morrow, Dicky, you know.'

'If that's Hallaton you're talking of,' said a young fellow who had just entered the room, 'he has gone on leave to-night.'

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'How do you know?' inquired Chives; 'and now I look at you, you've the air of having been at nefarious games yourself.'

'Never mind what I've been about, Dicky,' replied the other, laughing, 'but I happened to be in the Exeter station a short time ago, and saw Hallaton come in, and he and his portmanteau crossed to the up platform. He seemed rather in a hurry, just wished me good-bye, and said he was off.'

No more was said about Fred Hallaton that evening. Nor to any one but Dicky Chives did his mysterious departure offer any suggestion; but knowing all he did, Chives could not help thinking that Sarah Mercer and Hallaton both seeking the same train that evening was something more than a coincidence. That Miss Mercer should be starting by herself on a midnight journey, to begin with, was singular. A girl in her position would scarcely choose a night train to travel by, and that particular train stopped, as he knew, only at Taunton and Bristol till it reached Swindon, and would not reach even the first of those places till close upon midnight. If Miss Mercer was going on a visit to any of her friends, they must either keep abnormal hours, or the young lady was selecting a very inopportune hour to arrive.

Mr. Chives in the privacy of his own quarters, as he smoked a final pipe before turning in, summed up the case thus:—'He's done it, has Fred, no doubt. I'm not going to babble like a young hound before I'm sure, but I'm afraid the story will be all over the place before a couple of days are over our heads, and that he will have been duly disinherited, excommunicated, and all the rest of it by an exasperated uncle within the month. Poor Fred, he's gone a regular mucker, and no mistake. A bookmaker in your family may be an advantage, but not when you're so bad at picking winners as he is, poor chap.'

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CHAPTER XIV

TOOTELL IS MISSING

THE news of Sarah Mercer's elopement was by no means noised abroad so rapidly as Dicky Chives had anticipated. To begin with, nobody had actually seen them go off together, and the only person who was in possession of facts to draw that inference was Chives. The doctor was not given to talk, and though he had wondered what Miss Mercer was leaving Exeter for at that time of night, yet he did not know that Hallaton was travelling by the same train, and in short had troubled his head very little about it. Sarah was so well known in Exmouth that her absence would be certain to provoke comment ere long. But as yet it had not attracted the attention even of Mr. Tootell, avid as that inveterate gossip-monger was in news of all sorts. Still it need hardly be said that this was not the state of things at the Dragon. Her not coming home the first night her parents thought, though unusual, might be explained. She had many friends in Exmouth, and had occasionally stayed the night with them; but when she did not appear the next day, Mrs. Mercer lifted up her voice and spoke out, and when the good lady did that there was not much peace and quietness for those beneath her roof.

'She has gone off with that young Hallaton,' exclaimed the angry dame, 'the shameless hussy! She is never content without some man dangling at her apron-strings, and now she has brought her eggs to a pretty market. And as for you,' she continued, fiercely turning on her husband, 'you were pretty nearly as bad as she in the whole business, dinning into her head that she ought to marry a gentleman. Gentleman, indeed! They *don't marry* the likes of her. She has gone off with him, but she'll never have marriage lines to show for it. I warned her a score of times what the end of her gadding about and sweethearting would be—and now it has come. Well, she must go her own way. She never crosses doorstep of mine again.'

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Very rarely had Joe Mercer been seen angry, but it was in righteous wrath that he rose from his chair now and brought his fist down heavily on the table.

'Woman!' he cried, 'have you no heart for your own flesh and blood? I told her she was fit to marry a gentleman; so she is. There's not a girl in Exmouth can hold a candle to her. Ah! and she'll have a bit more brass, too, than most of 'em. If that Hallaton chap has tricked her he shall pay dearly for it, as sure as there's a sun in Heaven.' Mrs. Mercer was somewhat cowed by her husband's unexpected wrath, but for all that her household had a lively time of it for the remainder of the day. Sarah and her mother had never hit it off together. They had both violent tempers, and the quarrels between them had been bitter and frequent; but Joe Mercer was undoubtedly both fond and proud of his daughter, and counted her a fit wife for any man in the kingdom. Both he and his wife might be held blameless as far as they were concerned. In the first place Sarah was utterly beyond their control, and in the second place she was no young girl in her teens, but a young woman in her twenty-fifth year, and, like her brother Sam, they deemed her well able to take care of herself, and this opinion would probably have been endorsed by all those who knew Sarah Mercer best.

No sooner was that young lady's disappearance placed beyond doubt than the news of it rapidly reached Exmouth. It may be remembered that the Hebe who presided at the Dragon bar returned every evening to Exmouth to sleep, and this was a delightful bit of local scandal to take home to the bosom of her family; all the more so because Miss Mercer had been wont to snub her and treat her otherwise with some contumely. Mr. Tootell heard the news with no little disappointment, though, as he told his informant, 'It's only what I expected. I said weeks ago that it would surely happen; the only wonder is it didn't happen before.' Mr. Tootell, indeed, was frightfully disappointed that he had not been the first to distribute such a toothsome piece of scandal. He blamed himself severely for having been rather remiss lately in visiting the Dragon; but Mr. Johnson, alias Creasey, had so occupied his attention that he had not found time to attend to the Mercer

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family. The *soi-disant* Johnson was a most tantalising mystery to him. What that gentleman's business or pleasure might be down at Exmouth he was unable to discover. Two singular things in his conversation were his great curiosity about the old Dragon Inn, though often as Tootell had volunteered to take him out to see it, he had always declined; the other was the numerous inquiries he made about the Lydneys. He asked endless questions about the banker's family, about whom there was little to tell. Mr. Lydney, as far as his neighbours knew, had led the uneventful life of a prosperous country banker, and there was no reason to suppose there was any dark spot on the family escutcheon. One thing Mr. Tootell felt was imperative—to wit, that he must visit the Dragon without loss of time.

'Yes,' he said to one of his intimate cronies, 'I told old Joe how it would be. I warned him, but he paid no attention to me.' The shameless old liar had never ventured to say a word upon the subject. '"A strong-willed gal, Joe," I said; "yes, I grant you that, but you're wrong. It don't do to give 'em their head altogether, even if they do chafe a bit at the curb." I spoke to Sarah myself about it, too. Says I, "You're wasting your time, Sarah" —if he had made this observation to Miss Mercer his ears would probably have sung for the next two hours—"those soldier officers are all gilt and sugar. You pick up with a good middle-aged tradesman—that's the man for your money"'—and here Mr. Tootell paused, almost aghast at his own mendacity. 'Well, well,' he continued, 'poor Joe! he's an old pal of mine. It'll ease his heart, poor old chap, to tell all his troubles to me! I'll go over to-morrow morning and hear all about it; it'll comfort him, you know.'

'Yes,' replied his crony, dryly. 'I should think, Tootell, you would be a real comfort to any family in a state of domestic affliction.'

'I am, I am,' returned Tootell, earnestly. 'We should all endeavour to soothe our fellow-creatures in their hour of anguish. I'll be out there the first thing to-morrow morning, have a pint of mild ale with Joe, and tell him to keep his pecker up. Let you know all about it when I

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come back. By the way, you don't know a party of the name of Johnson, do you? Here he comes. Can't make out what he's doing here. By-bye; I must go and talk to him.' And Mr. Tootell trotted off to endeavour once again to turn the reticent Johnson inside out.

The fact that Sarah Mercer had left her home being established beyond question, no one in Exmouth seemed to doubt that Fred Hallaton was the companion of her flight; and when the news reached Mary Lydney, as it speedily did, she had no little difficulty in maintaining her outward composure. Her father brought the story home with him, and made much lamentation over Fred Hallaton.

'Great pity, great pity,' he said; 'as nice a young fellow as ever I met; and if this be true, and I've no doubt it is, he has hung a pretty millstone round his neck. I wonder how my old friend Sir Robert will take it! There's a deal of the General commanding about him, and I'm afraid he'll swear like that army of Flanders at such an infraction of discipline as he will consider this.'

Here Mr. Lydney fell into deep thought, and Mary took advantage of the circumstance to escape from the room. 'Yes,' mused the banker, 'a man's relations generally join in a chorus of loud-tongued abuse when he commits a mistake in life of this sort, and Sir Robert is not the uncle to omit that ceremony. I suppose his best way out of the scrape will be to marry the girl. By-the-by, I wonder what old Joe Mercer will do with his money. Judging from the sums he keeps passing through our bank, he must be making a lot somehow or other. He doesn't keep a very big drawing account, but he has always had the credit of being a warm man, and this year he's had the handling of hundreds, at all events. There's only this girl and her brother—a very wide-awake gentleman, I am told, who has taken to racing as a profession. I don't know anything about the turf myself, but I've always understood gentlemen lose fortunes and bookmakers make them. Poor young Hallaton is not the first man by a good many who has ruined his life for a woman,' and with this the banker dismissed the subject from his thoughts.

When Mary Lydney gained her room she sat down and gave way to a burst of bitter weeping. Tears principally

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of shame and anger. She was ashamed to think that for the second time she had allowed her heart to go out of her own keeping, and her pride was cruelly wounded to find what a mockery this love was that Hallaton had professed for her. Not three days after she had scornfully accused him of preferring another woman to herself, he had run off with that very woman. Emotional people are by no means those in whom the passions run deepest, and Mary Lydney, under a placid exterior, concealed a strong, passionate, sensitive nature. Sarah Mercer, wounded in her pride, vanity, or caprice, would have given vent to a storm of angry railing at the delinquent. Mary Lydney would never have opened her lips to a soul. With the first, it would be a skin-deep scratch, and forgotten in twenty-four hours. With the second, the wound would rankle deeply and take long to heal.

Sarah Mercer's elopement, indeed, made no little stir about the county generally. That it should speedily find its way into the local papers was matter of course. Gay, good-looking, a proficient at all games and pastimes, Fred Hallaton had made himself amazingly popular for many miles round Exeter. In country quarters it is usually the fault of the soldiers themselves if they are not constant and welcome guests in all the best houses around, and Fred Hallaton had usually more invitations to dine, sleep, and spend a few days in country houses than, having regard to his military duties, he could possibly accept. Miss Lydney, too, was popular in the county. Her intimates said there was a good deal of quiet fun in Mary Lydney when you knew her; so that, take it all round, Hallaton's escapade was quite a nine days' wonder. But Exmouth was destined to be speedily provided with another sensation.

Mr. Lydney was a magistrate of the borough, and one morning at breakfast his servant informed him that a Mrs. McIntosh wanted to see him.

'Show her into my room,' replied the banker, 'and say I'll be there in a few minutes.' And when he had finished his breakfast Mr. Lydney rose and walked off to see what Mrs. McIntosh wanted.

'Pray sit down, my good woman,' said the banker, as

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he entered the study; 'and then tell me what I can do for you. It's some magistrates' business, I suppose.'

'Yes, please sir. It's Mr. Tootell, which he've lodged with me now for four years come last Michaelmas. I've come to you to ask your advice about him.'

'You must be a little more explicit, if you please, Mrs. McIntosh. Mr. Tootell I believe to be a most respectable man. I trust you have no complaint to bring against him.'

'No, poor dear! It's himself I'm frightened about. He's a good, harmless old gentleman, as wouldn't hurt a fly. He gives no trouble; is as quiet, reg'lar lodger as a lone woman need wish to have, only he must know all that goes on in the house. But, deary me, we've all our little failin's, haven't we, sir?'

'Indeed, we have,' thought Mr. Lydney, 'and loquacity is yours, my good woman. Mrs. McIntosh,' he continued aloud, 'I must ask you to come to the point. I am pressed for time this morning.'

'Well, sir, Mr. Tootell—an' a more reg'lar gentleman no widder woman need wish to meet with—he went out and never came home to his dinner.'

'Come, Mrs. McIntosh,' said the banker, 'you really must get on a little quicker than this. There is nothing remarkable in that.'

'But he never came home to bed, which he's not done sich a thing ever since he first came to me.'

'Still, what is it you are wanting?' asked the banker, impatiently.

'And he didn't come home last night either, and he've said nothink to me about it, and nobody has seen him, and I don't know what to do about it, and I thought p'raps some of you gentlemen would make inquiries. He ought to be looked for, sir, oughtn't he? He ought to be found, and not to be allowed to go rampaging about without notice like this, frightening a poor woman out of her senses.'

'That's all you've to say, then?' observed Mr. Lydney.

'All,' replied Mrs. McIntosh.

The banker hastened to stop the flood of useless information with which he saw the applicant was about to overwhelm him.

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'That will do,' he said. 'I'll attend to the business at once, and direct the police to make all proper inquiries. Then, Mrs. McIntosh, we shall be anxious to hear all you can tell us. Good morning!' and with this Mr. Lydney promptly rang the bell, and his visitor was shown out.

Mr. Tootell was such a prominent figure about Exmouth that his disappearance would have been certain to attract considerable attention, even had not the shrill-tongued inquiries of Mrs. McIntosh called notice to it. An inquisitive man, with no business of his own to attend to, and who therefore interested himself most exasperatingly in the affairs of his neighbours, he was a well-known character, and literally pervaded the town. Since he had given up the White Hart, he had never been known to go away from Exmouth, and, indeed, previous to that his absences from home had been few and far between. When the banker went out he found that the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Tootell was quite the talk of the day; he was compelled to acknowledge that Mrs. McIntosh had some reason for wishing inquiries set afoot. For an elderly gentleman of peculiarly regular habits to absent himself for a couple of nights without mentioning his intention to any one was undoubtedly a singular circumstance. He had been seen to leave his lodgings in Rolle Street on the Tuesday morning, which was the day after the news of Sarah Mercer's elopement became public property in Exmouth, and since that nobody had set eyes upon him. Late on Wednesday night an acquaintance of Tootell's presented himself at the police station, and told them that on the Monday afternoon the missing man had expressed his intention of walking out the next morning to call upon his old friend Mercer at the Dragon Inn.

After the manner of most important witnesses he had been slow to hear of the mystery to the unravelling of which his testimony was probably the clue.

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CHAPTER XV.

THE MERCERS LEVANT.

EARLY the next morning the police went out to the Dragon to make inquiries for the missing man, and when the constable came back his news made Mr. Tootell's disappearance more mysterious than ever. He reported that he found the Dragon shut up, all the lower windows were closed and bolted, and there was not the slightest sign of any one being on the premises. He had knocked loudly at the door, but his knocking had met with no response; he had been round the house, but could see no means of effecting an entry except by force. He had met one of the maid-servants who had been employed at the house, who told him that she and the other girl had been paid their full wages to the end of the quarter the previous night, and at the same time they were informed that their services would be no longer required, as the Dragon was such a losing concern that Mr. Mercer meant to close it at once; perhaps the young lady who had charge of the bar could tell more about it. The police speedily called upon her; but no—her experience was exactly the same as that of the two maid-servants. She also had been settled with in similar fashion, and told she would be no longer required, the attempt to reopen the old inn having been a miserable failure. Asked if she knew Mr. Tootell by sight, she laughed and said, 'Certainly!'—that he was a constant visitor at the Dragon. On further inquiry as to when she saw him last, she replied unhesitatingly, 'On Tuesday.' That he called, after his usual custom, in the morning, and she had taken him a pint of ale into the bar-parlour. She did not see him leave the house, but it was quite possible that he might have done so without her noticing it. The bar-parlour was a room at the back of the bar, but not connected with it.

When these facts were reported to Mr. Lydney he proceeded to confer with one of his brother magistrates. Joe Mercer was a man passing honest; that the Dragon

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had turned out a losing concern was simply what every one had predicted; he seemed to have paid all his servants, and had, as Mr. Lydney well knew, a drawing account in his hands—somewhat smaller, it is true, than he usually kept there, but still there was nothing to warrant any suspicion that Joe Mercer was running away from his creditors. That Mercer had a perfect right to lock up his house and close a losing concern, no one could deny; and the magistrates debated for some time whether they were justified in ordering the police to break into the Dragon. That Tootell and Mercer were friends of long standing there were plenty of people to bear witness to; neither of them was a violent-tempered man, nor was there the slightest suspicion of there being any ill-blood between them; but yet Mr. Tootell, contrary to all his usual habits, had disappeared suddenly and mysteriously, and the last place in which he had been seen was the bar-parlour of the Dragon. The magistrates hesitated. Were the circumstances such as justified them in breaking into Joe Mercer's locked-up house? Mr. Lydney recalled to mind the famous skating accident of some years ago in the Regent's Park, and remembered how many people who started with the avowed intention of spending the afternoon on the ice, and who were supposed to have been drowned, had turned up afterwards, having changed their minds suddenly and left London on the spur of the moment. Who should say that Mr. Tootell had not been seized with a similar hasty impulse, and accompanied his old friend Mercer on his unexpected travels?

There really did seem hardly sufficient grounds for supposing that any harm had befallen Tootell. But the sudden disappearance of that gentleman and the elopement of Sarah Mercer had invested the Dragon with a halo of romance, and people began to recall some of the half-forgotten stories connected with the inn. Many of the idlers of the town flocked out to look at it, and, amongst others, 'the party of the name of Johnson.' Very soon a message came back to Exmouth to say that there was somebody in the house, and the excitement of the people outside rose to fever-heat; the police, and with them Mr. Lydney and one of his brother magistrates, were soon upon the

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scene, and after a short time there could be distinctly heard a faint cry of 'Hi! Halloa! Help, somebody!'

The magistrates at once gave orders to break open the door; but this turned out to be a more troublesome business than was anticipated, the front door of the inn being a good solid portal of tough oak, and lavishly furnished with bolts and bars. Suddenly one of the more enterprising of the spectators, who had gone round to the back of the house, said that the cries for help distinctly came from the leg of the building that ran into the garden, and that it would be easier to force an entrance through one of the windows there than to break in at the door. An attack was accordingly made upon one of the windows of the old ball-room. To smash through one of the windows was simple enough, but they had been boarded up from within with considerable solidity. Still, a very few minutes sufficed to make a breach in it, and as soon as the opening was large enough one of the constables entered, but at first, in the darkness of the room, could see nothing. He called to those at work outside to enlarge the opening, and as he did so, from a far corner of the room came a cry of 'Hi! Help, for God's sake!' The constable, whose eyes were now becoming accustomed to the gloom, made his way cautiously across, and in another minute was bending over the form of the prostrate Tootell, who lay bound hand and foot.

'I have found Mr. Tootell,' he shouted. 'Let in some more light. You're all right, sir, ain't you?'

'Cut these horrible cords,' gasped the luckless man, as the constable raised him. 'I don't know; I'm not sure. I've been shamefully treated.'

By this time the room was full of people, and the boardings of the windows were being rapidly torn down, but so numbed was Mr. Tootell that after his bonds were severed he was at first unable to stand. The police now took charge of the premises, and quickly cleared the room of all but themselves, the magistrates, and the victim, who was at present too exhausted to give an account of his mishap, and requested a little stimulant to restore him to himself.

In pursuit of this the police essayed to open the door of

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the ball-room, and being, like the doors of all old-fashioned houses, substantially built, it took some time to force.

Those who had obtained an entrance into the old ball-room had stared round them in undisguised astonishment; that such a room existed at the back of the Dragon was a surprise to most of them. They looked curiously at the pile of quaint, old-fashioned furniture which had been heaped together promiscuously—old-fashioned chairs, tables, pier-glasses, &c.; superfluities which had been drawn together from every room in the house. Some were dilapidated, some were serviceable, but all bore the signs of having been good in their day.

However, the police gave little time to look at all these things, for, in spite of the strenuous objections of the curious, they insisted upon clearing the room. One of those who begged most earnestly to be allowed to remain was Mr. Johnson. He asserted that he was an intimate friend of Tootell's, and should be uncomfortable until he had witnessed the complete restoration of that gentleman; but the police were obdurate, and he, like others, was compelled to retire. Had anybody been watching Mr. Johnson closely it would certainly have struck him that he was more curious about the furniture than anxious about Mr. Tootell. He scanned the chairs and tables narrowly, and when the latter had drawers seemed half-inclined to open them. However, as before said, his investigations, if he was really making such, were speedily brought to a close, and by order of the magistrates the police took charge of the house, with orders to exclude all visitors.

When Mr. Tootell had been taken to the bar-parlour, and had had a tolerably stiff dose of spirits-and-water administered to him, several bottles of which were found in the bar, the magistrates requested him to give some account of what had happened, and explain how it was that they had found him in the plight they did.

'It's a long story, gentlemen,' replied Tootell, in all the glory of being the hero of the hour, 'and I couldn't have believed that an old friend like Joe Mercer could have behaved so.'

'He is quite right,' whispered Mr. Lydney to one of his brother magistrates. 'It will be a long story.'

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'Well, gentlemen, you all know the misfortune which befell poor old Joe. You know how his daughter ran away and left him. I'm not one of that sort who don't stick to my friends in their trouble; so I thought on Tuesday morning I'd just walk over and cheer him up a bit. I'm an observant man, gentlemen, and I'd noticed usually that when I came over to the Dragon there was a party of the name of Brent hanging about—in fact, he lived here, and I never could make out what he was doing in this neighbourhood, or what he had come here for. Now, I always look upon it as a suspicious circumstance, as I dare say you do too, gentlemen, that a man should be loafing about a place for no particular reason. At first I thought he had come after Miss Mercer, and as I've always taken a friendly interest in that young woman, I ventured to hint as much; and she was that rude to me that at first I felt convinced my suspicions were well founded; but when that young chap, Hallaton, came hanging about I saw I was wrong.'

'Really, Mr. Tootell,' said the banker, 'we must ask you to come to the point; all this has nothing to do with the state in which we found you. Tell us briefly who you were assaulted by, and, I suppose I may say, imprisoned.'

'You must understand the case, sir, in all its bearings,' replied Tootell, with great solemnity. 'Very few men have gone through such a wonderful experience in the course of their lives. I shall make you open your eyes, gentlemen, before I've done.'

'He never will,' murmured the banker.

'Well,' continued Tootell, 'Mercer didn't receive my sympathy in the spirit I could have wished. In fact, he murmured something about "inquisitive people," and I'd just made up my mind that he was an ungrateful beast and that I'd bother my head no more about his troubles, when in came this man Brent. Now, you know what an aggravating thing it is, gentlemen, to think you recollect a face, but not to be able to call to mind where you've seen it. This was just my case with Brent. The last time I had been over to the Dragon I felt pretty certain that he wore a wig, and I thought if I saw him without his wig I might perhaps recognise him. He seemed a little disconcerted at seeing me; but there was no doubt about it—he did wear

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a wig. He had seated himself between me and the door, and when I got up to go shortly afterwards I caught my foot in the carpet, and stumbled up against him to save myself from falling. Somehow or other Mr. Brent's wig got knocked off in the scuffle, and I recognised him.'

'I presume, Mr. Tootell,' said the banker, laughing, 'that this was quite accidental on your part?'

'I don't deny, gentlemen, but what I made the most of the accident. But people that wear wigs, and are doing nobody knows what, ought to be looked after.'

'And what happened then?' inquired one of the magistrates.

'This Brent flew at me like a wild cat. Took me by the throat before I could utter a syllable, and then he and Mercer hustled me into the ball-room. A nice bit of gratitude that, on old Joe's part, to one who's been a friend to him all his life!'

It would have been rather difficult to say what particular claim Mr. Tootell had on the gratitude of the landlord of the Dragon.

'When they got me in there,' he continued, 'they told me no harm was going to happen to me so long as I held my tongue. Then there was a hurried consultation between them in a low tone, at the end of which that insolent Brent told me that as I chose to poke my nose into things that didn't concern me I must take the consequences; that no harm would come to me, but as I had persisted in coming where I wasn't wanted, it was now necessary that I should stay there for the next forty-eight hours, and that if I gave no trouble I should find myself decently treated. You saw, gentlemen, with your own eyes, what the brute's idea of decent treatment was.'

'Then,' said Mr. Lydney, 'you were kept locked up in that old ball-room all the time?'

'Oh, no; indeed I wasn't. There are immense cellars under that old ball-room. They are a sight to see, gentlemen—it'll be necessary you should see them—and I was kept down there till a little before daybreak this morning. Then I was brought upstairs, tied as you found me, informed that people would come and release me in the course of the day, locked in, and left.'

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'And what on earth was the reason of this unprovoked assault and imprisonment?'

'Because,' replied Tootell, 'I had recognised Brent, and found out why Joe Mercer took the old Dragon Inn'

CHAPTER XVI

WHY JOE TOOK THE DRAGON

Now, why Joe Mercer had taken the Dragon had not only puzzled his friends, but set a considerable portion of the people of Exmouth talking. Even the magistrates, when he had applied for a licence, had wondered what on earth the man could want with a house from which the custom had departed years ago, and nearly decided not to grant it, on the grounds that it was not needed by the public. That Mercer's mysterious reasons for embarking in such a hopeless concern were about to be laid bare excited the interest of Mr. Lydney and his brother magistrates not a little.

'You say that we shall have to see these cellars, Mr. Tootell, and no doubt we shall; but before we do so I must ask you one question—Under what name did you know this man Brent, and in what capacity did you know him?'

'I knew him before I came to Exmouth. He went then by the name of Jackson, and,' continued Mr. Tootell, with some hesitation, 'I had business relations with him.'

'Of what nature?' asked Mr. Lydney.

'Well, he represented himself as traveller for a distillery.'

'Ah, you had dealings with him?'

'Just so,' replied Mr. Tootell, with a brevity in striking contrast to his usual garrulity.

The retired publican, in truth, was by no means anxious to go into the details of his former dealings with Brent. He had bought spirits from that worthy when he kept a tavern in London. He had carefully abstained from asking

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questions, but from the quality and price of the liquors had always had misgivings that they were fraudulently come by.

'Now,' said Mr. Lydney, turning to the police, 'get a light, some of you, and let us go and see these cellars. They are under the ball-room, I think you said?'

'Yes,' replied Tootell; 'there's a trapdoor in the corner leads down to them.'

Lights were soon procured. The trapdoor was easily lifted, and disclosed a short flight of stone steps. They descended these, and found themselves in a moderate-sized but remarkably dry vaulted room, which bore signs of recent occupation. There was a truckle bed in one corner, a couple of chairs and a table, and a shelf or two, garnished with a few drinking-cups and platters.

'Well,' said the banker, as he looked around him, 'no man ever lived here from choice. Whoever has been occupying this place must have had motives for concealment, and, except for his assault upon you, there doesn't seem to be anything against Brent.'

However, at the further end of this room were two low archways, each of which led to a vaulted cellar of much larger dimensions than the first, and in both of these inner vaults there were signs in abundance of the occupation of their late inmates.

'Looks as if they had been brewing of something,' said one of the policemen, pointing to the extinguished furnace, which was surmounted by a large, globular-shaped copper vessel surrounded by brickwork.

'What a very odd place to have a copper!' said Mr. Lydney. 'And what a deuced oddly-shaped one!'

'Don't you know what it is, sir?' said Mr. Tootell. 'Why, that's a still. You just send into Exmouth for one of the excise officers, and he'll precious soon let you know all about it.'

'Go and fetch an excise officer at once,' said Mr. Lydney, turning to the police. 'Who would have dreamt of there being such immense vaults in connection with the Dragon as these?'

'Ah, they must have been built in the old smuggling days,' rejoined one of his brother magistrates, 'and no doubt have held many a contraband cargo in their time.'

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Although neither Mr. Lydney nor his brethren were conversant with distilling, they had no doubt whatever that Tootell was right. He told them he did not understand the process, but he had seen a distillery in London, and could not be mistaken.

Pending the arrival of the excise officer they adjourned to the bar-parlour once more.

'Let me see,' said Mr. Lydney. 'Mercer took this house at the beginning of the year, and opened it two months afterwards; he must have been carrying on this illegal distillery for close on twelve months.' And then the magistrates amused themselves with trying to calculate what sum Mercer might have made at this nefarious business, and in this speculation they were assisted by the experiences of Mr. Tootell.

When the excise officer arrived they once more adjourned to the cellars.

'Weugh!' exclaimed that worthy, 'this is a proper little game to have been carried on under our noses. To think of old Mercer going in for such a plant as this; why, this is as complete a still as ever I saw. Look here, gentlemen, you see in this cellar to the left they've got their mash-tuns, refrigerators, pump in the corner, water laid on, everything; and here, in this cellar to the right, is the still itself, and not a little one either.'

'And how much spirits do you suppose they could make a week?' asked Mr. Lydney.

'Impossible to say, sir; five or six hundred gallons—may be more; but considering the Government duty is ten shillings a gallon, that would be good enough for them; that would mean they would make two or three hundred pounds a week, or a thousand to twelve hundred a month.'

'God bless me!' said one of the magistrates. 'And do you suppose Mercer to have made five or six thousand pounds in this inn?'

'Every bit of it—that is, he and his partners, for there must have been more in it than him and Brent. You see, it takes three or four of them to work a still, gentlemen. During the actual distilling they can't leave the furnace for a minute, and when they are fermenting, as they would be, in the other room, that requires watching almost as close.'

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'Well,' said Mr. Lydney, 'I had no idea that taking the Dragon was as good as that; why, this old fox Mercer was doing a better business than any hotel in Exmouth. However, he has fairly slipped us, and I suppose there is nothing else to do but to issue warrants against him and Brent *alias* Jackson, on a charge of defrauding the revenue. By the way, do you know anything about this Brent?'

'Nothing, sir,' replied the officer, 'but it's very likely they will in London. You see, the men who go in for this style of fraud are a very limited number. It requires a considerable amount of chemical knowledge. Those who have acquired proficiency at it try it on again and again, the profits are so enormous, and the principal hands engaged in it are pretty well known at head-quarters.'

'Well,' said Mr. Lydney, turning to the chief constable, 'you had better fasten up the house again, barricade the windows we've broken open, and then, as soon as we can get back to the town, we'll have those warrants made out for you.'

Mr. Tootell was more than repaid for past suffering on his return to Exmouth. He was the hero of the hour, and people crowded round him to hear the story from his own lips. The news that he had been found had reached the town some time before, accompanied by a somewhat indefinite rumour of extraordinary revelations at the old Dragon Inn. A skeleton had been found there; the proceeds of long-forgotten robberies had been discovered in the cellars, the mystery of a murder which had taken place many years ago had been solved; in short, there was no end to the wild rumours about the discoveries made in the search for Tootell; local reporters who had vainly sought to be admitted now thronged round the rescued man to learn all particulars. The *Exmouth Gazette* was full of it the next morning, and a day later the London papers—it was the dead season—contained paragraphs headed—'Singular discovery of an illicit still in Devonshire.' If Mr. Tootell was the lion of the day, no one could complain that he refused to roar. His good nature in relating his adventures knew no bounds, and the wonderful manner in which his moving

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tale amplified by continued narration was a source of infinite mirth to some of the wags of Exmouth. One of these latter, indeed, observed that it was impossible to picture any bounds to Tootell's adventures. 'I think,' observed this young humourist, 'it was about the eighth time I had induced him to tell me this story, and he never was more brilliant. His following the conspirators down the cellar steps, determined to discover what their desperate calling might be, his frightful struggle with four reckless smugglers by the side of the still, was most melodramatic and artistic. Give old Tootell time, and he'll work up that adventure of his into a thrilling romance. It'll become something blood-curdling before he dies, see if it won't.'

The London authorities on being communicated with replied that it was of course impossible for them to say for certain, but they should judge it to be the work of a man called Jackson, if that was indeed his real name, for his *aliases* had been innumerable. 'He is the most daring and successful modern smuggler of our times. Illicit distillation is this man's favourite game, and though we have never as yet been able to lay hands on him, this, if it be he, is only one of a life-long series of frauds on the revenue. He does not confine himself entirely to this line of fraud, but, curiously enough, his enterprises always partake of this nature, insomuch that they are usually frauds upon the revenue in some shape. He was originally a clerk in a large London distillery, in the working of which he took the greatest interest, and of course it was there he acquired his proficiency in the process. After two or three years he got into money difficulties and absconded. His books were examined, showing a considerable deficit to his employers. Since that he has turned up pretty regularly every three or four years, engaged in some such illegal business under a different name. He has led this life since quite a young man, for he was only about four or five and twenty when he first came under our notice. It is not of much use describing him, for we have no description of him upon which we can rely, although we have half a dozen which profess to depict him; but one of the man's peculiarities is that when he embarks on one of

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his frauds he invariably disguises himself with considerable cleverness, and the consequence is that "Slippery Bill's" personality is hardly known to his confederates.'

When Mr. Lydney read the account of the London police he remarked to his brethren on the Bench, 'There can be little doubt, I think, that Brent is the man. He evidently attaches great importance to concealing his identity, and when Tootell, maddened by curiosity, knocked off his wig—well, he suppressed Tootell till he had achieved his escape.'

The morning after Tootell's rescue Mr. Lydney had been somewhat astonished by the advent of a visitor who sent in a request to speak to him. The banker ordered him to be shown into his study, and upon entering it a man in the garb of a farm-labourer said—

'Well, measter, I was told to give 'ee this, and this bit of a note.' And the man handed the banker a heavy key and the letter.

'What is this the key of?' inquired Mr. Lydney.

'I dunno for sure,' was the reply, 'but I reckon it'll fit the side door of the Dragon.'

'And who gave it to you?'

'Muster Mercer.'

'Ah! where did you leave him?'

'I druv him, the missis, and that 'ere Brent chap to Exeter before daybreak yesterday morning.'

'What, to the station?' asked Mr. Lydney.

'Yes; and he told me I was to bait my horse, and when I got up hoame I was to bring that 'ere key and note to you.'

'And why didn't you do it?' inquired the banker sharply.

'Well, I got hoame so late,' replied the man, rather sheepishly.

'Let me see,' said the banker, 'you reached Exeter about eight o'clock, and, allowing for getting your breakfast and baiting your horse, you ought to have been back again at the Dragon a little after midday at the latest. Come, tell me the truth about this. I suppose the fact is you got drunk?'

'Well—and that's a fact, measter,' replied the man.

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'Muster Mercer and Muster Brent were both that liberal to me on going away I got a drop too much, and then I fell among a lot of chaps as were good company, and I got a drop more, and then I fell asleep like.'

'That'll do,' replied the banker, 'you may go now. Lucky for my friend Tootell we discovered him, or he would have been locked up in the Dragon still. What an appetite he'd have had for breakfast!' And then Mr. Lydney bethought himself of the note which he was still twisting between his fingers, and opened it.

'The bearer of this will give you the key of the side door of the Dragon Inn. You had better send out at once, as you will find Tootell locked up in the old ball-room. He owes his disagreeable position to his unfortunate propensity for poking his nose into other people's affairs. I feel quite sure that any inconvenience he may have suffered will be amply compensated for by the gratification of his curiosity.—J. MERCER.'

'Ah!' said the banker musingly, 'Joe Mercer never wrote that. To begin with, it's the letter of a much better educated man than he is; and, secondly, I am his banker, and therefore perfectly acquainted with Joe Mercer's signature and handwriting. Now, if he didn't write it, it must have been Brent who did. I will take care of this, it might come in useful some day.' And with that the banker carefully locked up the note in his escritoire.

CHAPTER XVII

PUBLIC OPINION PROVES FICKLE

WHILE Mr. Tootell is in all the glory of perpetually narrating his adventures at the old Dragon Inn—a narration of continuous amplification—he has rather neglected to keep his eye on Johnson; otherwise he would have been struck by the singular fact that though he has never been able to induce Johnson to accompany him to that hostelry when it was open to the public, yet now it is closed, and

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in the hands of the excise officers, Johnson is most pertinacious in his endeavours to get inside of the old inn. He has, indeed, by dint of bribery succeeded, but apparently is not satisfied with the results of his visit. Very curious indeed seems Johnson as to the old ball-room, and more especially with regard to the dilapidated furniture strewn about therein. He has succeeded in obtaining admission there twice or thrice, and the sharp young officer who has attended him has conceived a suspicion that he is desirous of being left alone there. He was overcome with a sudden faintness on the first occasion, and requested his attendant to fetch him a little brandy, but was informed there was no such thing in the place; the small residue of spirits left by Mr. Mercer in the bar having been already removed. Then Mr. Johnson said that he would sit down until he recovered, but that there was no necessity for detaining the officer. However, the latter quietly declined to leave him, stating that their orders were excessively strict on that point, and all the more so because they believed that there had been an attempt made to enter the old ball-room only the night before last, with what object they could form no conjecture, but one of their men had been undoubtedly aroused by what sounded like an attempt on one of the French windows opening into the garden, and the marks of footsteps outside showed clearly next morning that some one had been hanging about the place, though upon finding the inmates on the alert he had probably retreated. Whatever Johnson's motive was, he still hung persistently about the Dragon; he was anxious to know what was likely to become of it; the inn had now naturally reverted to its legitimate proprietor, would it go on as an inn, was the owner likely to turn it into a farm-house, in which case he supposed all that old furniture would be sold. Very desirous, indeed, apparently was Mr. Johnson to know if all those antiquated old chairs, tables, couches, &c., were coming to the hammer, but this, he was told, was not as yet decided. The excise, once they had cleared out the machinery of the illicit still, had nothing more to do than to hand over the Dragon to its owner, and leave him to determine what he would do with his property.

In the meantime, although Brent and Joe Mercer were

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diligently sought, yet no tidings could be obtained of them. From what they had gathered, the excise officers had come to the conclusion that Brent was the moving spirit of the whole business, and the people in London had told them that he was a very adept in the art of mysterious disappearance. At all events, upon this occasion he and the entire Mercer family—for what had become of Sarah was equally unknown—had vanished from the sight of all their friends and acquaintance.

The investigation before the magistrates occasioned Mr. Tootell not a little discomfort; it was gratifying, no doubt, to once more relate in public his experiences at the old Dragon, but it was a little uncomfortable to be pressed by a sharp local solicitor about his previous acquaintance with Mr. Brent. To admit that gentleman had been one of his customers when in business in London, was all very well, but a titter ran round the court when Mr. Tootell was fain to confess that he had had dealings with him—in short, that he had bought spirits from him in large quantities.

'And found it capital good business, too, Mr. Tootell—capital stuff, and got it cheap, I'll be bound, eh?' said the solicitor, in his most jocular manner.

It was in vain Mr. Tootell spluttered, and declared that Mr. Brent had represented himself as the agent of one of the most distinguished distilling houses in the Metropolis. The audience evidently came away tickled with the conviction that old Tootell had done a good deal of business with the 'Free Traders' in his publican days, and that his interference with old Joe Mercer and his confederates had probably resulted from desire to share in the profits of the concern. Public opinion in consequence a little veered round about Mr. Tootell; an idea prevailed that, far from being the victim of his accidental discovery, in reality he had endeavoured to levy black-mail on the grounds of his casually discovered knowledge. Mr. Tootell rapidly perceived that, far from being commiserated as a martyr, he was regarded with contemptuous pity, looked upon as an old man, who, though hardly dealt with, had to some extent deserved to pay a penalty for poking his nose into his neighbours' affairs, to say the least of it, even if he had not gone

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further and tried to make capital out of his surreptitiously acquired knowledge. That a man like Tootell, who in the indulgence of his insatiable curiosity, had brought about such an explosion of a fraudulent business, should regard himself as a public benefactor was natural. Stung by the ingratitude of that public, he bethought himself of once more seeking the society of the stranger Johnson, only to find that shadowy individual had disappeared from Exmouth quietly as he had come. Mr. Tootell sadly came to the conclusion that the mysteries of this wicked world were getting beyond his comprehension.

'Only to think,' he murmured, 'of old Joe, after all these years, turning to illicit distilling; whoever could have thought it? And as for that Brent, well, who could have thought of coming across him after all these years! He always did put in wonderful good stuff at a wonderful cheap rate; but, dash it, who could have fancied his coming down here? Then there's this Johnson, who's he? What does he want, and what was he adoing?' and then Mr. Tootell shook his head and gave the whole thing up, as one does a double acrostic which has proved too much for one's abilities.

'The scandal of to-day in London is well-nigh forgotten in a week; in a small provincial town we make more of such gossip, but it does not last very long. The story of the Mercers had pretty well died out of men's minds, the elopement of Fred Hallaton with the handsome Sarah was already a thing of the past, when it was suddenly brought sharply home to his brother officers by the re-appearance of the delinquent in Exeter. Dicky Chives could hardly believe this news when, returning home from one of his sporting pilgrimages, he was told of it in the ante-room, just before mess.

'Where is he,' exclaimed Dicky. 'Are they getting his old quarters ready? Is he come back to stay? is—is . . . she with him?'

'Can't tell you, Dicky, I'm sure,' replied his informant; 'he came into the ante-room here this afternoon for about ten minutes, had a drink, and looked as black as thunder. I was here because I happened to be on duty, but there was nobody else. Hallaton, as you know, is not a bad-

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tempered fellow, but he can be deuced unpleasant when he gets his hump up. He answered the two or three questions I ventured to put to him so precious short that I shut up. All I know is that he called upon the Colonel, who was out; that he is staying somewhere in the town; but as for asking whether Madame was with him, thank you! no, I didn't put that question.'

'No,' said Chives, slowly. 'I understand that; it wasn't likely. But I thought it just possible that he might have said something about his wife.'

And then Dicky paused, for this was just the knotty point which much perplexed Hallaton's comrades. That he had gone off with the fair Sarah there was no doubt, but no announcement of their marriage had appeared in the papers. The illicit trade in which Joe Mercer had been detected made the connection still more deplorable, and as the Colonel had said, with a father-in-law who was simply not awaiting his trial for defrauding the revenue because the police were unable to lay hands on him, it was certainly easy to understand that poor Fred might shrink from publicly confessing his marriage.

'It matters little either way,' continued the chief. 'Married or unmarried, he's hung a millstone round his neck which must be his ruin.'

This was not the verdict of the Colonel delivered at mess that evening, but what he had said when the scandal first came to his ears. Hallaton's case was much discussed after dinner that night; he was a great favourite with his brother officers, but they were one and all of the same opinion, that Fred had made one of those fatal mistakes which mar a man's whole life. Then, too, it was remembered that Hallaton had considerable expectations from his uncle Sir Robert. Many of the old hands in the corps had met Bob Hallaton in the days when he was a soldier, and described him as a choleric domineering man, though by no means a bad fellow; and Chives, and the little knot who were now discussing him, arrived at the conclusion that an uncle of that description, like Sir Oliver in the famous comedy, would be sure to have 'a damned disinheriting countenance.'

'It's an awful bad business,' said Dicky Chives. 'Fred

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has always been a bit anxious that his uncle Bob, as he calls him, shouldn't hear of his little kick-ups, losing money, racing, and so on; but they have all been child's play compared to this. He is proud as Lucifer, you see, and the idea of Miss Mercer as the future Lady Hallaton would stick in his gizzard sadly. Fred was to have gone down there, too, and his not doing so will make matters worse.'

However, there was no other conclusion to be come to except that 'there was another good man gone wrong,' and then they gave themselves up to much speculation as to what Hallaton meant to do, and what had brought him back to Exeter a month before the expiration of his leave.

On his return from his ride the Colonel was duly told of Hallaton's call, and also received a note which the latter had left, begging to know at what hour it would be convenient for him to call the next morning. The Colonel sent a brief reply to the Rougemont Hotel, where Hallaton was staying, and at the appointed time Fred was ushered into the chief's sitting-room.

'Sit down,' said the latter, 'and tell me what has brought you back. It's a bad sign when you young fellows come back before your leave is out. Not long ago, remember, it was Goodwood cleaned you out; but this, I'm afraid, is a worse business.'

'I can't help what people may say or think,' replied Hallaton, somewhat stiffly. 'It is a question that concerns myself; but I won't hear a word against the lady.'

'It is not at all likely, Mr. Hallaton, that I am going to cast any reflection on your wife. I presume I am right in giving the lady that title,' and the Colonel paused for a reply.

'That is a question nothing to the purpose,' replied Hallaton, doggedly.

'We will assume then that she is,' said the other quietly. 'I can only point out that it would be awkward at any time, but it is particularly awkward for you just now that Mr. Mercer should have involved himself with the revenue officers. I should advise your not rejoining us. You must know you have cut your own throat as far as this neighbourhood is concerned.'

'That is what I have come to see you about,' replied

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Hallaton. 'Of course, I don't want to come back here. I have made up my mind to exchange to India as soon as I can possibly arrange it. I thought, under the circumstances, it was only right to let you know at once.'

'The best thing you can do, Hallaton,' replied the Colonel. 'I am very sorry to lose you, but your soldiering on here will be excessively unpleasant to yourself and Mrs. Hallaton.'

'I have no doubt,' replied Fred, 'that my affairs have been pretty freely discussed during the last month. People are probably saying that I was thoroughly aware of old Mercer's fraudulent business, and suggest that it was a knowledge of the enormous profits he was making that put it into my head to run away with his daughter.'

'You must expect to have ill-natured things said of you; but the story of your marriage will speedily be forgotten except in this immediate neighbourhood. Nobody will know anything about you in India,' said the Colonel, although the words were prompted more by good nature than belief in his assertion. He was aware, as was Hallaton, that there had been a lengthy and but slightly garbled paragraph entitled 'The Romance of Crime' going the round of the daily papers, in which the discovery of the illicit still at the old Dragon Inn and the elopement of the handsome daughter of the landlord with a young officer of the Horse Artillery had been mixed up into a very titillating side-dish for the cravers of such tit-bits.

'I've nothing more to say, sir, than to wish you good-bye,' replied Hallaton, rising. 'Perhaps you will tell Chives that I'll write him word what I want done about my traps, and say good-bye to the other fellows for me?'

A hearty hand grip, and the two men separated.

'It's the only thing for him to do,' thought the Colonel, as his visitor descended the stairs. 'It's devilish odd, but he never actually said he *was* married.'

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE DREAM DISPELLED

When Fred Hallaton arrived in London it was to no hotel or pleasant lodgings that he drove, but to a solitary bachelor's room in Bury Street. No wife awaited him with a glad smile of welcome, and he sat gloomily on the bed while the attendant unstrapped his portmanteau. He was face to face once more with his misery, he had kept his mouth close shut to his old chief, he wished to hear no word against this woman who had entrapped him, he would make plaint of his bitter experiences to no one. He was tied for life to her, and already they had agreed that each should take their separate way.

The brief period of their married life might be summed up in this wise—three weeks of intoxication, followed by three weeks of storm, recrimination, and bitter reproach. Imperious Sarah found that she had married a man who, when roused, was quite as fierce-tempered as herself. She awoke to the fact that if she had married a man much above her in station, he was, all the same, poor; and that far from being launched, as she supposed, at once into society, her husband would not even introduce her to his friends; he told her hotly that he had sacrificed his own prospects for her sake, and she retorted just as fiercely that she had done much the same, and thrown herself away upon a pauper. What was the use of his holding the position of a gentleman if he had not the means wherewith to keep it up? As if she, with her handsome face, mightn't have had the pick of a dozen better than he. Then, lashed to madness by her bitter tongue, he retorted that he was not aware of much demand for convict's daughters at present, which naturally produced another flood of violent vituperation from the lady.

Scene after scene of this sort passed between the pair, and if ever a man was thoroughly cured of his infatuation by the end of six weeks it was Fred Hallaton, though, strange to say, Sarah, disappointed as she was in her

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marriage, and never having had any real love for him whatever, still entertained for him a capricious liking; but when at the end of two months he sternly said he would live with her no longer, that such modest allowance as he could make her should be paid to her through his solicitor at any address she might choose to give, she assented sullenly. He divided what money he had with her, and Mrs. Hallaton departed early the next day without giving any intimation of what she proposed to do, or of where she proposed to go; while as for Fred, he at once transferred his modest effects to the before-mentioned bachelor bedroom in Bury Street, and at once informed the agents of his regiment that he was desirous of an exchange to India. About this he was told there would be no difficulty, it was a mere matter of a few weeks, and for this purpose Fred knew very well that he would have no great difficulty about getting an extension of leave should he require it.

He was morbidly sensitive about that luckless paragraph, 'The Romance of Crime.' He fancied everybody must have read it, and everybody be anxious to behold the young fool who had eloped with that fraudulent publican's daughter. He shrank from meeting any of his old friends and acquaintances. He went to his club only in the evening to inquire for letters, and that at the dinner-hour when he was little likely to run up against anybody he knew in the hall. Even in the matter of the exchange he had picked out two or three stations in India where the officers were nearly all men he had never met. He had of course to resign his 'jacket,' which would once have grieved him sorely, but what mattered it now? He had resigned everything; his one anxiety was to be far away from England before the wretched story of his miserable marriage became known. That he and his wife were already parted would soon be the talk of his friends and acquaintances, he made no doubt. Let him only be out of the country before that happened was all he hoped. Whether his uncle had heard of his ill-starred marriage, he knew not; but that he had completely ruined his prospects in that quarter he felt certain. If he can but get away before it all leaks out—India and the shooting of big game was all that was left to him. Stay! There was fighting of some kind always

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going on there, and if he was in luck he might throw in for something of that kind. Henceforth his career must lie in that country, to England he would have to say good-bye for years. In the meantime there was nothing for it but to live quietly in London until his exchange was arranged, and, that settled, to take passage for the East and trust that he and Sarah might never meet more.

When the tempest overtakes us and we are socially engulfed beneath the wave, it is astonishing how soon we are forgotten; for a brief period there are comments of regret, surprise, or the malicious 'It is only what was to be expected,' and then people talk about us no more. The Colonel had briefly announced to his officers that Hallaton had exchanged to India, and would not return to Exeter, but when asked by Chives if Fred was married he briefly replied that he did not know. He had thought proper to assume that it was so in his interview with Hallaton, but he bore in mind that Fred in a somewhat marked manner had never admitted it. The marriage had never been announced in the papers, and the consequence was that all the neighbourhood came to the conclusion that no such ceremony had taken place.

There were, however, two people who still bore Fred Hallaton constantly in mind; the one of these was Mary Lydney, who angrily acknowledged that she had allowed herself to care more for this faithless philanderer than she had any business to do; for the second time the girl was fain to confess she had let her heart go out of her own keeping—and oh, the shame of it! to be flouted for such a woman as Sarah Mercer. Hallaton's attentions to her had been too marked to be unobserved by her friends, and though no word had reached her ear, she knew too well they had pitied her for being left to wear the willow. Gall and verjuice, this, to a proud girl like Mary Lydney. She hated herself for still thinking of him, and it is needless to say no word of inquiry concerning him ever escaped her lips. The other person who still sadly thought over Fred Hallaton's mistake was his staunch comrade, Dicky Chives. He had received directions from Fred about forwarding his baggage to London, with which he had at once complied. The letter was dated from Hallaton's club, and as Chives

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contemplated very shortly running up to London to see the pantomimes and other novelties which managers are wont to produce at Christmas-time, he was determined to take advantage of the opportunity and look Fred up. He felt pretty sure that Hallaton would sail for India as soon as ever he could arrange matters, but till then he no doubt would be found in town, and surely Fred would see *him*.

On arriving in London that vivacious young gentleman lost no time in carrying out his intention, but the club porter told him that, though he believed Mr. Hallaton was in town, he only called there now and again for letters, and that he had no idea of his address. There was only one thing to be done, and that Dicky immediately did, to wit —scribble a note to Fred, expressing a warm wish to say good-bye to him before he sailed, and leave it with the porter. To a gentleman of Mr. Chives's temperament time in London was not to be wasted, something must be seen every evening. It was all very well for your regular Londoner to be content with a quiet rubber and a cigar in the smoking room. They could take the whole year to see the sights and have their fling whenever they liked. He couldn't. He was wont to say, 'I've got three weeks' theatres to cram into a fortnight, and even if I had more leave I should have no more money. Two weeks in London always breaks me.' In pursuance of this system of thoroughly enjoying himself, Mr. Chives, after a late breakfast, found himself one morning making his way down the Strand, with a view to procuring tickets for himself and a chum at the Gaiety Theatre. Somewhat to his surprise, in the vicinity of Wellington Street, he ran across no other than Sam Mercer. He had never seen the bookmaker since they had parted last October on Newmarket Heath.

'How d'ye do, Mr. Chives,' said Sam; 'I'm awful glad to have met you. I want to see somebody from down Devonshire way bad, and next to the Doctor you are the man who can best tell me all I want to know. If you wouldn't mind coming up to the Victoria for a few minutes I should like to have a little talk with you.'

Chives yielded willing assent, and as they turned up Wellington Street Sam remarked—

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'This is a deuce of a go, and what made the old 'un do it I can't think. It bothered me what he took that Dragon for, but I knew he could run alone, and no mistake. You'd have to get up the t'other side sunrise to get the best of him; but if he has been sharp he has always been straight. I can't think what made him do it.'

'Well,' said Chives, 'of course I've heard all there is to say about it, but I should think the enormous profits they were making would about account for their going in for it. They've been clearing thousands, according to the papers.'

'Yes, but he didn't want it,' replied Sam; 'he had made his pile—and, though he is a close man, a very tidy pile it is, you bet.'

'Never had any money myself,' said Dicky; 'but I've never met any one yet who couldn't do with a bit more.'

'Right you are, sir,' said Sam, laughing; 'but I'm awful sorry for the old 'un. I don't know where he is, and shouldn't tell you if I did, but I honestly don't. If he can keep out of the way for a bit, and lie low, it'll perhaps blow over, but he'll find he's knocked down all his winnings if they catch him. Now, Mr. Chives,' he continued, as they turned into the Victoria, and made their way into one of the rooms, 'only give it a name, sir, or will you have some lunch?'

Chives having been duly provided with a tankard of bitter ale, which he specified as being most suitable to his requirements at the moment, Sam Mercer continued—

'I dare say it made a great talk down at Exmouth. I split with laughter when I read how they tied up that prying old fool, Tootell. I can't make out who this Brent can be, and how he could have influenced my father into embarking on such a risky speculation.'

'He is a very noted offender,' replied Chives, 'particularly in this line. At least, that's what the revenue officers sent word from London.'

'Yes; I understand that right enough, but the question is how on earth he induced the governor to go into such a dangerous speculation as that. Money! No doubt he was fond of money, and perhaps not over particular how he made it; but if ever there was a wary man it was my

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father, and I'd have laid long odds that no one could have ever 'ticed him into such a risky game as this. No; it beats me altogether.'

'Sorry for your parent,' rejoined Chives, vaguely; 'but I can't see anything remarkable in his case. These keen speculators have a way of going the wrong side of the post at times.'

Mr. Chives was getting a little bored by hearing Sam Mercer's jeremiads over the misfortunes of his progenitor. There was nothing singular to him in a speculative jobber being found guilty of an extensive fraud.

'Now, Mr. Chives, there is another thing I want to talk to you about. Mr. Hallaton has gone off with Sarah—can you tell me anything about that?'

'No,' replied Chives, curtly.

'It isn't likely you gentlemen will like it, I know,' continued Sam; 'it isn't likely Mr. Hallaton's friends will like it. But do you know how they're getting on together?'

'No,' replied Chives, with equal brevity.

'I don't know much of Mr. Hallaton; but remember she is my sister,' said the bookmaker, earnestly. 'Can you tell me where they are?'

'No,' rejoined Dicky. 'I have never seen Fred Hallaton since the night before I left Exeter for the Houghton Meeting.'

Sam Mercer hesitated for a moment, and then said, in a low voice, 'Can you tell me whether they are married?'

'I honestly don't know,' was the reply.

'Well, sir,' resumed Sam, 'I should like to have known that, and I should like to have known how they got on. Sarah is a handsome, clever girl, and would have soon learnt to hold her own anywhere; but she is vain and fond of amusement, and if she don't get plenty of that she'll be apt to show temper—and she's got one. She ain't the sort of girl that every man could manage. One couldn't warrant her free from vice, and quiet in double harness. No, I should have been curious to know how her marriage turned out with any one; how things will go now I can't say, but if the governor hadn't got into this scrape Sal would have been a good match for most men. His great fad was that she should marry a gentleman, and he would have contri-

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buted pretty handsomely to keep the house going while he lived, and left her a good bit of money when he died.'

'I really don't know where they are,' interposed Chives.

'Well, sir, I'm sorry to hear it. Mr. Hallaton needn't have been afraid that I wanted to come pushing my way into his house just because he married my sister; but I was in hopes you could have answered those two questions. However, you can't, so there's no more to be said.'

'I can't, indeed, Mercer,' replied Chives, rising, 'and now I must really be going. Good-bye.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Sam, as he accompanied him to the door of the club. 'Good-bye; and remember you may always rely, when you come racing, on Sam Mercer to do you a good turn.'

'Poor Fred,' muttered Chives to himself, as he walked up the Strand. 'Mercer is a very good fellow, but, still, one wouldn't care to have him as a brother-in-law.'

CHAPTER XIX

THE SKELETON IN THE CUPBOARD

CALL no man happy till he is dead, saith the sage, and it is hard to say amongst those we habitually mix and consort with who among them bears an unclouded life. Here is our prosperous friend whose dinners and equipages are the talk of the town, whose smiling face betokens no care on his mind, and yet some of those investments of his in the City may be troubling him sorely. His sons may be going wrong, and his daughters waxing contumacious, but for all that it behoves him in these days to show a genial front to the world and let no man guess that the fox is gnawing at his vitals. Perhaps it is as well that Society demands that we should not bore it with our troubles. What have our acquaintances to do with our griefs in this world? They require us to amuse them, to give them dinners; but if we mean to go about like mutes at a funeral—bah! go to, let the dead bury their dead. If you mean to be of the world there should be sunshine in your face, sunshine in your

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manner, let circumstances be what they will with you. What matter that you are on the verge of bankruptcy, or that your daughter has levanted with the footman? If you are going to make moan over it, turn recluse, disappear, fly to obscure continental watering-places; but, above all, don't inflict a melancholy face on Society. By the way, I often wonder if those saturnine people, whom we are wont to laugh at because they take their pleasure sadly, have not the best of it in the long run. If they have no supreme moments of exaltation, yet on the other hand they know nothing of those depths of depression to which more elastic temperaments are liable.

That there is a skeleton in every house is a very old saying, but taken in a modified form a perfectly true one. It may be a tremendous secret involving family honour, or the very possession of the family lands, or it may take the much more prosaic form of never being able to lay hands upon a decent cook. Mr. Lydney, the prosperous, slightly pompous banker of Exmouth, had his skeleton—and a very grim skeleton it was. A genial, jovial, free-handed man, keeping almost open house, and never better pleased than when entertaining his friends, he kept his skeleton very closely locked up, and put it away from his own mind as far as possible; but, for all that, ever and anon it rattled its grisly bones, and reduced the buoyant banker to considerable despondency.

Thirty years before, the bank of Lydney and Son had been broken into, and though the house had made light of it at the time, and never acknowledged their loss, yet some very valuable securities had been abstracted from the big safe. Several reasons had conduced to their keeping their loss a secret; first and foremost, the robbery was supposed to have been committed by one of the family, then in their employ as a clerk. This young man had absconded, the securities were missing, there was no trace of violent entry to the premises in which the missing man slept, and, in short, everything pointed conclusively to his being the offender. That old Mr. Lydney should be loth to prosecute his luckless son was natural. There was a strain on the bank at the time, and the old gentleman, no longer the man he was, feared that the effect of giving publicity to

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their loss would have the natural effect of increasing the pressure. His son, the present Mr. Lydney, was too young a man then to grasp the situation. They hushed the thing up; such endeavours as they made to recover the securities were done privately and without giving a free hand to the police. They would make no charge, and though they offered a liberal reward at Scotland Yard for the recovery of the missing deeds they never even mentioned their loss in Exmouth.

Mr. Lydney was a man who lived well up to his income, and more than once the loss of those missing securities had been a source of sore trouble to him; but the strain had come round again, and without them he could hardly see his way to pull through. Amongst those missing securities were the deeds of a large mortgage on the estates of a good old country squire who for all these years had paid his five per cent. contentedly. He had died, and his son, a sharp business man, reigned in his stead. But the son, when he came to his throne, had no idea in these days of paying five per cent. for money, and gave immediate notice of the redemption of the mortgage. What was Mr. Lydney to do? He had not those deeds to surrender. The explanation must involve the history of the robbery, while public rumour would be sure to even multiply the value of the securities abstracted. It would give his business a shake which it was scarce in a position to sustain. Suspicion of stability is a sore trial for a bank, even when backed up by considerable resources. To Lydney, a run against the house meant ruin. If he had met his trouble boldly in the outset it might have been got over, but he and his father had made sure of recovering those securities in a short time without causing any scandal, and, for the sake of that unfortunate son of his, old Mr. Lydney wished to avoid that.

The time for owning their loss went by, the time for hoping to recover the missing papers did the same, and henceforth Mr. Lydney put the whole business aside as an unsavoury memory, and locked up his skeleton close in its own cupboard. Now the time had come it must see the light, and Mr. Lydney brooded sadly over how he had best face the storm. It was all very well at the end of thirty years to say these mortgage deeds had been stolen, but the mortgagee

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might well suspect that those deeds were pledged elsewhere for moneys received.

Worried and anxious, Mr. Lydney sits in his sanctum glancing almost mechanically over the paper. He listlessly reads the account of a bad accident on the South-Western, near London, in which two people have been killed and a score more or less seriously injured; among those badly hurt is a man named Johnson, but his name has no more significance to Mr. Lydney than any other in the dismal list, all of whom are quite unknown to him.

The next thing that catches his eye does, however, arouse some interest in his breast, if only that of idle curiosity. It is a notice that if Joseph Mercer, formerly of the Dragon Inn, does not remove all the furniture and chattels appertaining to him on those premises before February 20th, they will be sold by public auction. As the banker well knows, that paragraph will arouse considerable interest in Exmouth, once more the question will be warmly debated what has become of those Mercers, and also what has become of Sarah? That Hallaton has gone, or is going to India, is well known; the neighbourhood have his brother officers' word for that; but in what relationship Fred stands to Miss Mercer they admit they do not know, and the neighbourhood, as we have already seen, has drawn its own conclusion on that point. That the auction will attract a considerable crowd of idlers from Exmouth is certain. Many people are curious to see that old ball-room of which they have heard so much of late, and get a peep maybe into those mysterious cellars where the smugglers of olden days stored their 'fresh rum' and contraband goods, and wherein that modern and far more scientific smuggler, Joe Mercer, so lately and so largely defrauded the revenue. There might not be many come to buy, though there would be sure to be a sprinkling who would look forward to picking up a treasure among that dusty old-fashioned furniture of bygone days, but still the sale would be sure to attract a crowd of sightseers. Yet what was this to the banker? He had seen it all at the time of the Tootell outrage. He had no intention of attending the auction, but he did lazily wonder what had become of the Mercers; the authorities seemed no more

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able to lay hands on them than years ago they had proved equal to the recovery of those lost papers.

Ah, those papers. It was idle to think now about those lost securities, about those lost mortgage deeds. That long-looming thundercloud was about to burst, and Mr. Lydney could do nothing to avert it, but simply trust to the unblemished character of a lifetime for the acceptance of belief in his story.

It is the day of the long-advertised sale at the Dragon, when the morning's post brings to the banker so strange a letter that it is not till he has perused it three times that he gathers its contents. Even then it is in such vague, unsatisfactory fashion as was only to be expected from the incoherent message it contained.

It came from the house surgeon of the Ditchford Hospital, a town about twelve miles from London, and close to the scene of the late railway accident, and in it he stated that he had in his charge a patient of the name of Johnson, a sufferer from the late luckless collision, and whose not only days, but very hours, were numbered. 'He is a cool, somewhat cynical old man,' continued the doctor, 'and seems to regard his demise with complete indifference. He is quite sensible, though he would seem to wander in his talking, but this is simply because we cannot follow his train of thought. He speaks of things to which we have no clue. His predominant idea is to say "Good-bye" to a man named Brent, of whose whereabouts he appears to have no knowledge, and, failing that, he desires to send a message to you. He is sinking fast, and it may be that what appears unintelligible to me may be quite comprehensible to you. It is also possible that he may rally for a little, as is often the case just before death, and in that case I may be able to forward you something very much clearer than I do at present, which simply amounts to this—"Let Lydney, the banker, Exmouth, know—missing deeds in, or should be in, table at Dragon—old table back of ballroom.'"

Who was this Johnson? And could any reliance be placed on his message? Brent he fancied he knew all about. He was Joe Mercer's partner in that illicit distillery, and who formerly did business in the same line with

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Tootell in London. But who was Johnson? How on earth could these securities of his have been secreted all these years in the Dragon, within two miles of the very safe from which they had been abstracted? Had they been there all that time? Who put them there? And once more—Who was this Johnson? Did Joe Mercer know anything about it? And Mr. Lydney threw himself back into his chair to once more piece the thing out in his own mind if he could. Impossible! How it had come about was inscrutable; but these papers meant so much to him now that he was prepared to snatch at the wildest chance of recovering them. What was he to do? Good heavens! and the sale took place to-day. There was no time to be lost. If he had only known sooner he would have instructed somebody to buy the whole of the furniture. What mattered two or three hundred pounds in a case of this sort? It would be well worth his while to spend that money for the mere chance of recovering those papers. There was but one thing for it—he must attend the auction himself, and take care that not a table escaped him. He would buy them all, let them go for what they would.

When Mary Lydney heard of her father's intention, she at once expressed a wish to accompany him. All the old legends connected with the Dragon in bygone days had been unearthed of late, and there were plenty of men like Mr. Lydney who had heard queer stories from their fathers about the doings that went on there in the early days of the century. It had somehow got about—mainly, perhaps, from the garrulity of Mr. Tootell—that there was yet living not far from the old inn an ancient sailor, who had actually in his youth taken part in the contraband trade, and who could spin many a gruesome yarn of the doings of the Dragon in those times. It had become known that, if properly tipped, old Bob Mutter could make your flesh creep with narratives of the dark deeds he had witnessed in that old ball-room; of the gambling and riotous revelling that had taken place there when the free traders were in luck; and of the fierce quarrels that were wont to arise between these reckless spirits over their cards and liquor. Like many old sailors, Bob Mutter was not only fond of 'yarning,' but had a fine natural gift of mendacity, which

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gave spice to his narrations. He speedily discovered that his visitors—they were mostly of the feminine gender—liked a strong dash of melodrama in the stories they handselled him for telling. Like a wise man, he made hay while the sun shone, and dressed up his wares to suit his customers; a judicious embroidery of facts, which was quite in accordance with the veteran mariner's natural bent. Miss Lydney, like many other young ladies of the place, had visited old Bob Mutter to hear his tales of the smuggling days, and was naturally therefore curious to see this old ball-room, the scene of more than one of his most stirring narratives.

There was one thing, however, that surprised Miss Lydney not a little, and that was her father's feverish anxiety to be in time for this sale. He, usually so calm and self-possessed, whether bound on business or pleasure, now kept taking out his watch every five minutes, fidgeting about the room, and repeatedly inquiring whether she was sure she was quite ready to start. As a rule, if she kept him waiting a few minutes the banker was perfectly unmoved. To-day he was in a state of extreme irritability. Again and again he dived his hand into his coat-pocket and produced a catalogue of the sale, which, after looking over attentively for some minutes, and making sundry pencil notes in its margin, he thrust back into his pocket, and then once more took out his watch.

For some few weeks past she had noticed a great change in him. He who was formerly possessed of such a remarkably cool, equable temperament, was now nervous, irritable, and snappish. A most punctual man, he had now developed that most trying description of unpunctuality—the being ready considerably before the time. He would be dressed for dinner, for instance, a good quarter of an hour before that meal was due; insist upon it that the clocks were all wrong, and ring every five minutes to hurry the cook. It was the same with everything else. People had begun to remark to each other how very touchy the banker was becoming, while to Mary they remarked how very ill her father was looking. One of the leading medical men in Exmouth said that Lydney looked to him like a man with some great worry on his mind. 'The man has an

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excellent constitution, I know, but he looks to me as if he were either worked or harassed to death.'

At the present moment Mr. Lydney is making a peripatetic lunch. He keeps walking up and down the room, occasionally snatching a morsel of food or a glass of wine standing: partaking, perhaps, more of the latter than of the former, and finally announces to his daughter that it is high time to start.

'I am quite ready, papa, if you like,' replied Mary; 'but it wants an hour to the commencement of the sale, and it will not take us half the time to walk there.'

'No matter,' was the reply, 'I am particularly anxious to be there in good time. Come along.'

Mary made no reply, but rose, and the two at once started for the Dragon.

CHAPTER XX

THE AUCTION

ALTHOUGH they arrived at the inn quite half an hour before the time advertised for the commencement of the auction, yet there were already a good many people wandering through the house; more especially was the gradually-thickening throng gravitating towards the old ballroom. Thither the banker quickly made his way, and at sight of it stopped aghast. He might have known it, of course, had he but given it a thought. He had expected to find all that conglomeration of old furniture heaped confusedly as he had last seen it, covered with dust, and piled pell-mell together as it was on his last visit. He came prepared to look out for that table against the wall. Little chance of identifying the table in that way. As he might have guessed, the furniture had been well dusted, sorted, ticketed, and laid out in regular rows for the inspection of the public. True, the majority of the crowd were mere idle spectators, but here and there came the genuine buyer, the persistent auction hunter, ready to

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purchase anything over which it struck him he could turn a penny—pulling open drawers, tapping the furniture, feeling legs and arms of chairs, turning them up, tapping tables and cabinets in all directions; especially active, to Mr. Lydney's horror, in the jerking open of drawers to see that they worked easily; which, to do that furniture of bygone days justice, they usually did, a good deal better than those of the cheap, gimcrack stuff common to our times.

Picture to yourself a man wound up to the highest pitch of excitement, who has come down to this sale prepared to buy every table that may be put up at any cost, upon the bare chance of the drawers containing those lost papers upon which the holding of his very position depends. Fancy his seeing the drawers of these tables jerked carelessly open by intending buyers, any one of whom might discover those papers and quietly drop them into his pocket at any moment. He was watching these men now with the eye of a hawk; but can you not fancy his imagining that dozens of men had done all this before he had arrived; that the very men who dusted and laid out the furniture had also carefully turned out those drawers. A cold sweat bedewed the banker's brow as he thought how hopeless his quest was. Granted this weird message sent to him from the brink of the grave was true, how slender was the chance that any dependence was to be placed upon it now. That the securities might have been there once was possible, that to the best of the dying man's belief they were there yet was quite likely, but that they were there still was most unlikely. This man Johnson could hardly be supposed to know anything of the recent events that had happened at the Dragon, that a man of the name of Johnson had been living for two or three weeks in Exmouth just previous to the absconding of the Mercers, and had, moreover, shown the greatest curiosity with regard to the old inn was a thing of which Mr. Lydney had no knowledge. 'It was absurd,' muttered the banker, 'useless, hopeless;' but for all that he determined to buy every table put up for sale that day. Even those of the bed-rooms he made up his mind should not escape him, though supposing the man Johnson's story to be true it was in one of the old-

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fashioned tables in the ball-room that the papers must have been originally concealed.

When Mr. Lydney took a prominent place in front of the auctioneer's rostrum, and, taking out his catalogue, commenced to display a lively interest in the sale, Mary Lydney's face was filled with amused surprise.

'Why, papa, dear,' she said, 'I thought curio-hunting was always left to me. I never dreamt that your anxiety to get here early was because you were an intending buyer.'

'Just so, just so, my dear,' replied the banker, nervously; 'not often, Mary, I intrude upon your hobbies, but I happened to have marked down a curious bit or two here that I should like to pick up if possible.'

The auctioneer was a man versed in his business, he understood what 'playing 'em in' meant—that is to say, he invariably put up a little trumpery to start his sale so as to give time to the genuine buyers to settle down before offering the more valuable goods for competition, and when Mr. Lydney in an excitable manner bought an ordinary deal dressing-table for something about its cost price his daughter's bewilderment became unbounded. What could it mean? She looked up at her father, and then with a nervous little laugh, said—

'Surely, papa, there's nothing quaint or old-fashioned about that?'

'No, no,' he replied anxiously, 'that's not the bit I mean—never mind, tables are always useful things about a house.'

But a decently furnished house, even though not very large, would contain a good many tables, and the sale was by no means limited to the furniture of the old ball-room, the auctioneer had not as yet come to the disposal of that. Mr. Lydney bought another table, and yet another, and by this time his proceedings had begun to attract the attention of the auctioneer and the professional buyers. What could the banker want with these commonplace tables? He was not a man given to attending sales, or given to the picking up of bargains—a quiet, steady man with an evenly balanced mind, who had never shown the slightest sign of eccentricity, and here he was bidding as if the accumulation of

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tables was the object of his life, for it had already attracted the attention of more than one of these keen-eyed business men that it was tables only the banker seemed desirous of buying. One of the speculators indeed was so impressed by the mere fact of a shrewd, practical man like Mr. Lydney buying up the tables that, though he did not profess to understand it, he could not help thinking there was something in it.

'If it's good business for him,' argued this worthy, 'it should be good business for me,' and when they came to the ball-room furniture, and a really quaint, old-fashioned table inlaid with brass was put up, he speedily capped the banker's bid. Mr. Lydney immediately trumped his adversary's trick, and then the nods from both sides came quick as the strokes of a piston. The room watched this little duel with considerable interest; but Mr. Lydney was not to be denied, and the table fell to him at last, for what in the eyes of the spectators was a sum considerably above its real value. But during the excitement of the struggle for its possession, the banker had worked himself up to the conclusion that this was the table indicated by Johnson. Where it had stood it was impossible to say, and the dust, of course, had been carefully removed, but it had undoubtedly been part of the furniture in the old ball-room. However, there were two more old-fashioned tables, evidently a pair, and not of the same pattern as the one the banker had bought, amongst the furniture of that room, and these after a sharp competition were secured by Mr. Lydney. The state of nervous excitement into which he had by this time worked himself was not only frightening his daughter, but had also attracted the attention of several of his friends.

'My dear Lydney,' exclaimed one of the latter, 'you'll pardon my saying so, but of all the curious fads for a man to take up, this table-collecting is the oddest. Those are nice tables you bought last, but what can you want with the rubbish you got before?'

'Every man has his whims at times,' rejoined the banker, irritably, 'and I suppose I may indulge mine, like other people.'

'Certainly,' replied the other, dryly; 'you can well afford to; but you'll forgive my saying that you don't play this

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game with your usual coolness—not as you would play your rubber, for instance; you let these scamps run you up absurdly.'

The banker turned petulantly away, and, seeing the boots at one of the principal hotels amongst the crowd, went across to speak to him concerning the removal of his treasures. Yes, his friend was right; he had made rather a fool of himself; it was absurd buying all those common tables to start with. The dying man's message had distinctly said, 'The table in the old ball-room.' He just glanced once more at the catalogue to see there was no other table amongst the furniture there, and then he resolved to go home. His head ached, and he was conscious that his extraordinary whim and his manner were attracting attention. No, there were only three tables mentioned amongst the contents of the ball-room, and he had got them all.

No sooner did he suggest to his daughter that he thought the heat of the room was too much for him than she at once urged their leaving.

'I'm tired to death of it all, papa, dear,' she said. 'Let's get out and have a breath of fresh air; the walk home will do us both good.'

Still, although the banker allowed himself to be persuaded to quit the house, he was restless and uneasy; could not be got to leave the Dragon by any manner of means until his emissary had returned with a truck, and he saw those three tables safely on their way to his own house. However, the truck, carrying as many tables as was possible, was at last on its way, and Mr. Lydney and his daughter started on their homeward walk.

Just as they reached their own door they were overtaken by the gentleman who had laughed at the banker about his fad for table-collecting.

'Well, Lydney,' he said, 'I didn't think you were going to let anybody else have a table to-day, but your adversary got his chance after you had gone.'

The banker's face was troubled.

'Why, the sale was over when I left,' he said; 'the old ball-room finished the whole thing.'

'Not quite,' interposed the speaker; 'the bar-parlour came afterwards, and, oddly enough, amongst the contents

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was an old-fashioned table something like those you bought.

A groan almost burst from the banker's lips. To think, in his excitement, he should not have turned the page in his catalogue, and thereby missed seeing that there were the contents of one more room to be disposed of!

'Fired by your example,' continued the speaker, 'there was some pretty smart bidding for that table. Your adversary got it, but I shouldn't say he got it a bargain. Good-bye,' and, raising his hat to Miss Lydney, the banker's friend passed on.

Good heavens! his efforts had been all in vain; for just as in his excitement the banker had convinced himself that the missing papers were in that first table he had purchased in the old ball-room, so now was he equally convinced they were in this table that he had missed buying. Who his opponent was he did not know, but there would be little difficulty in ascertaining from the auctioneer the name of the professional buyer who had become the proprietor of that last table. There was no time to be lost. He must go back to the Dragon and see if it were possible to buy that table at any cost. But here his daughter intervened, and declared he should do nothing of the kind. She said that she was sure he was very unwell. He looked tired and worried to death—that he must come in and rest, and have a cup of tea or refreshment of some kind. She pointed out that both vendor and purchaser had in all probability left the Dragon by this time—that to-morrow would be plenty of time to see about it. That if he had set his heart upon that table it was not likely he would have any difficulty in obtaining it; the man who had bought it would be only too glad to take a moderate sum for his bargain; and at length Mary Lydney had her own way. She was beginning to feel very anxious about her father. He was evidently exhausted with the excitement he had gone through. For some weeks past she had felt uneasy at the change which had come over him. She could not only see it herself, but other people noticed how ill the banker was looking. Then what was this extraordinary craze that possessed him for buying tables? And Mary got really frightened as it flashed across her mind that perhaps her father's brain was

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affected. The quiet of his own home and some tea certainly had a tranquillising effect upon Mr. Lydney, but for all that his restless mind was persistently running on the lost papers. Supposing the story of this man Johnson were true, when had he last seen the table in which they were deposited? Was it a few weeks ago, or a few years ago? No! surely it must have been, at all events, since the occupation of the Dragon by Joe Mercer; perhaps he should hear again from the Doctor at Ditchford; if not, he would write to him. In the meantime he really did feel tired out, and yielded assent to his daughter's dictum that there was no more to be done that day.

As for the buyer of the coveted table, that cunning merchant had purchased it solely on speculation. Far from having got it a bargain, he thought he had paid very dearly for it, and would never have gone so high as he did had he not thought he knew where to dispose of it at a profit. He had bought it with a view of selling it to Mr. Lydney!

CHAPTER XXI

A MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE

THAT the banker opened the drawer of every table before he went to bed that night it is almost needless to say; but the result was unsatisfactory; they were all perfectly empty, with the exception of the one which had so attracted his attention in the ball-room. In one drawer of that was an old glove, a faded ribbon, and one or two more such worthless trifles; but as for papers, there was not a sign of them, and it was not till his search had proved unavailing that Mr. Lydney became thoroughly aware of how sanguine he had been of success. Then his thoughts reverted to that table he had failed to secure. Could those long-lost papers be there? He was still too much excited to take a matter-of-fact view of the case, but even he could not overlook the fact that standing in the bar-parlour, a room in constant use, it was hardly to be supposed that the drawers had not only been opened, but were probably in use. In that case,

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if there was any truth in the man Johnson's story, the missing papers were probably in the hands of the Mercer family.

Then, once more the question arose, who was Johnson, and how came he to know anything about this robbery of so many years ago? Still, the man couldn't have invented this story, he must have had some cognisance both of the stolen deeds and of the Dragon Inn, and then it suddenly flashed across the banker who this Johnson must be. This dying, if not dead, man, could be no other than his unfortunate brother, whose unaccountable disappearance from the bank had pointed so conclusively to his being guilty of the robbery thirty years ago. He had been advertised for, it had been guardedly suggested to him through the medium of the newspapers that money would be paid and no questions asked for the restitution of those securities, but all in vain. He gave no sign, and Richard Lydney had never been heard of since the day he so stealthily decamped and left the bank-safe and the street-door open behind him.

The banker's mind was made up; he would commission some one to buy that other table for him the first thing next morning, and then he himself would start for Ditchford. It was possible if he arrived in time his wretched brother might make full confession to him of all the circumstances of the robbery, and be induced to tell him when and where he had last seen those deeds and securities.

Mr. Lydney passed a restless night, and when he rose for the first time recognised that he was something more than out of sorts, and that he was in danger of becoming really ill. However, he at once made up his mind that that must wait, he had no time to be ill just now. When he announced his intended journey his daughter put in a strong protest and earnestly urged him to give himself a couple of days' rest. The banker was, however, inflexible.

'I can't help myself, Mary,' he said; 'families are often afflicted with some member who has disappeared, and of whom they feel somewhat afraid of hearing any more. We have our painful secret like other people. The business on which I am going cannot be postponed, but I promise to

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lie by for a day or two when I come back,' and with this Mary was fain to be content.

From the auctioneer Mr. Lydney easily ascertained that the buyer of the missing table was a dealer named Abrams, and the man of the hammer further volunteered the information that he had no doubt the banker could easily obtain it if he wished, that Abrams had merely bought it to sell again, and that it was a simple question of what he was prepared to pay for it.

'It will really make very little difference to you, Mr. Lydney,' said the auctioneer. 'Abrams ran you up all day yesterday, and this table, after all, won't cost you much more than the others did.'

Mr. Lydney made his way forthwith to the dealer's. He was too anxious to become the possessor of this table to leave the purchasing of it to another. There was very little difficulty about it, though his evident anxiety to become its owner induced the crafty Abrams to ask a little more than he had originally intended. The banker hastily paid the sum, upon condition that the table was at once sent home, a condition which Abrams punctually fulfilled. Feverishly the banker tore open its drawers, only once more to encounter disappointment. He would go at once to Ditchford. Should his luckless brother be dead there was nothing more to be done. His intentions had been doubtless good, but he had lost the clue to the missing papers, and the sole chance of their discovery in Mr. Lydney's eyes depended upon their having fallen into the possession of the Mercers; and what had become of them, or how he was to obtain trace of them, the banker had not an idea. He only knew that, though anxiously sought by the revenue officers, they had so far completely baffled them.

On his arrival at Ditchford Mr. Lydney drove straight to the Infirmary, only to once more experience disappointment. Too late! too late! Yes, he was always too late. He had been too late in acquiring possession of those tables, and yet what else could he have done? The man Johnson had died that afternoon, and yet till his incoherent confession reached him it was not possible for the banker to conceive that these missing securities were secreted at

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the old Dragon Inn. He naturally asked to see the doctor, and that gentleman received him with evident interest, and informed him that Johnson had made an extraordinary, though brief rally, before he died. He was perfectly lucid and collected, buoyed up with no false hopes of recovery, but anxious to make a few final arrangements while his strength was left him.

'Did he leave any further message for me?' inquired Mr. Lydney.

'Not a word,' was the reply. 'His sole anxiety seemed to be to see somebody of the name of Brent, but where that person lived we could get no indication from him. When we offered to send for this Brent he only smiled, and said it didn't matter. He had, however, a long conference with the chaplain, about which I know nothing more than that he dictated a letter to this man Brent, which the chaplain wrote for him, and has solemnly pledged himself to deliver should he ever find an opportunity.'

Mr. Lydney's attention was aroused. This man Brent, he knew, had been the associate of the Mercers in the working of that illicit still at the Dragon. Was it not likely that Johnson had also been concerned in it? If so, there was good reason to believe that his knowledge of the whereabouts of those papers had been correct, and that they were in the hands of the Mercers was still probable.

'Can I see him?' was his next question.

'Certainly,' replied the doctor, 'serious though his injuries were, there was not the slightest disfigurement to the face. If you have ever known him before you will easily recognise him. Not a pleasant face to look at, but better to gaze upon, now that it is purified by death, than it was. Come this way.'

They traversed the corridor; the Doctor quietly turned the key in a door at the end; another moment, and the banker stood by all that remained of that light-hearted brother whom he had never seen since he was a scapegrace boy of twenty. Gently the doctor drew back the sheet that covered the face, and then the banker's perceptible start of astonishment arrested his attention.

'That Richard Lydney! Impossible! There is not the slightest trace of a resemblance.' The slender, slight

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active boy, rather below medium height, could never have grown into the tall powerful man upon whose corpse he looked down, and in the grim careworn face there was no sign of his laughter-loving brother. Still in thirty years of life, when the world goes hard with us, there is not much left of the lightness of our younger days; but the physique of the dead man could never have been that of Richard Lydney. No; the banker felt he was gazing down at one whom he had never seen before.

'You don't recognise him,' said the doctor.

'No,' rejoined the banker, 'this is not the face I expected to see. I feel certain that I have never set eyes on this man before.'

For two or three minutes Mr. Lydney stood nonplussed. What was he to do next? Who Johnson might have been it seemed now impossible to ascertain, and unless he had left some clue to the whereabouts of those papers in the letter the chaplain wrote for him, all hope of their recovery seemed to have died with him.

'Do you suppose,' asked Mr. Lydney, 'that the chaplain would allow me to see that letter?'

'I can't say,' replied the doctor; 'but I should think not. He declined to repeat its contents to me, and is pledged to destroy it if in the course of three years he should fail to find Brent.'

'Stay!' suddenly exclaimed the banker, as a thought struck him. 'This man knew all about a robbery that was committed many years ago on my bank at Exmouth. The police were employed unsuccessfully at the time, and I am curious to know if this man was known to them. His identification might possibly clear up a great mystery.'

'There can be no possible objection to that,' rejoined the doctor. 'He was respectably dressed, had a little money in his pockets, and a receipted lodging bill made out to Mr. Johnson, and that is all we know about him. We have had no communication concerning him from anybody, and if any one can recognise him so much the better.'

'I'll write to town at once,' said the banker, 'and I've no doubt if I defray all expenses they'll send me an officer down from headquarters to-morrow. You think there is

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no hope of the chaplain telling us the contents of that letter?'

'No,' rejoined the doctor, with a smile. 'Our chaplain is a good, but rather peculiar man, most conscientious about what he considers his duty, and —— well, the fact is he has rather High Church ideas on the subject of confession.'

'I see,' replied Mr. Lydney; 'and now I'll take up no more of your time.'

'Good-bye,' said the doctor, 'and if I might offer a word of advice, I would say take care of yourself; this business seems to have somewhat upset you.'

The next day brought a detective officer down from London, and, after gazing steadily at the dead man for a minute or two, he said 'Yes, gentlemen, there is no doubt about him, nobody was better known to the force. He has been a burglar all his life, and passed half of it in prison. His name was Jim Creasey.'

Mr. Lydney said no more in the infirmary, but as he walked back to his hotel with the detective he told the latter the whole story.

The officer listened attentively, and then said: 'Of course, I know nothing of the case; it was long before my time. Creasey was a well-known man when I joined the force, but I gather from what you say that he never was suspected of the business in any way. I am, of course, speaking rather at random, but I shouldn't think a robbery of that kind was in Creasey's line; he would go for money or jewels, but hardly understand what to do with securities. Your own idea strikes me as the right one. He knew all about the robbery, and is probably right about where the papers were concealed at one time. They are most likely in the hands of old Mercer now, and the next you will hear of them will be an offer from him to restore them for a consideration. Where he is we don't know, but suppose them all to have gone abroad. Good-day, sir, I've just time to catch my train. I don't see that there is anything else for you to do but wait.'

By the time Mr. Lydney regained his home there was nothing for him but to adopt the detective's advice. The banker was seriously ill and down with a sharp attack of fever. He was a little light-headed, and from his wandering

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talk, when the fever was at its height, Mary Lydney gathered sufficient to understand what was the nature of the anxiety that so weighed upon her father's mind. She knew now that securities were missing from the bank; that they had been stolen some years ago, but who Johnson and Richard were, and what they had to do with it, she had no conception; she had never heard of either of them. She understood now the reason why he had bought up all those tables, but she put it down to the hallucination of a man suffering from the first symptoms of fever. The sale of that furniture at the Dragon, she conceived, had brought back some association of his younger days. It was possible, she thought, that he had played hide-and-seek as a child in that very room. Her mind was full, remember, of stories of the old inn, and she knew that in her father's boyhood parties were still made up in the summer-time to eat strawberries-and-cream at the Dragon. However, she kept her own counsel, and though the sick nurse told the doctor that the poor gentleman was always worrying about some missing papers, yet the doctor put down his illness simply to overwork. He told Miss Lydney that, though no doubt her father was seriously ill, there was no reason so far to suppose that he would not pull through, nor any cause to fear that his brain would be permanently affected. In the meantime, by the doctor's advice, Mary disposed of all the tables with the exception of the one pair—one of which had come from the old ball-room, and the other from the bar-parlour. These had taken her fancy, and she resolved to retain them, although her father's medical adviser had held that everything that could recall to a sane man the phantasies of the period when he was light-headed was best done away with.

CHAPTER XXII

SAM DISCOVERS HIS FATHER

Dicky Chives received no reply to the note that he had left at Hallaton's club. He had called once and ascertained that Fred had received it; he could do no more, and, much

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as he wished to shake hands with his old chum before he left England, he saw no prospect of doing so. The night before he left town, however, a hasty note was brought to him at his hotel, which briefly intimated that Hallaton would be glad to see him at his lodgings in Bury Street between nine and ten. Nobly sacrificing his programme for the evening, his dinner ended, Mr. Chives hurried to Hallaton's abode. He found him in that final bustle characteristic of those who are departing upon long voyages. Trunks and portmanteaus not yet closed, a litter of gun cases and smaller packages, and the intending traveller, cigar in mouth, sitting gloomily amongst the chaos and execrating sundry tradesmen who were late in delivery of their promised goods.

'Sit down, old man,' said Hallaton, gravely—'that is, if you can find anything to sit upon. I've got no other room, and am in a muddle, as you see. I wanted to say good-bye to you, Dicky, and I want you to do something for me. Ask me no questions. I've made a muddle of it, and that's enough for you to know. I sail for India to-morrow, and am likely to see a good deal of that country before I set foot in England again.'

'I know,' replied Dicky, 'see it all from the Himalayas to Cape Cormorin. That's the legitimate phrase, I believe. Bless you, we all have to do it sooner or later. "Right you are, says Moses," as the song says.'

Fred Hallaton gave a faint smile in acknowledgment of his mercurial friend's vivacity; but, to do Dicky justice, he felt sad enough about his old friend's future, and it was simply that he thought it right to assume a cheeriness on saying good-bye. 'You know Sam Mercer,' continued Fred; 'you have done him a good turn—at least, so I gathered from your letter. I shall want to know all you can induce him to tell me about his family—all his family, remember.'

'I saw him the other day,' replied Dicky, 'and he declared, and I believe quite honestly, that he had no conception of what had become of his father and mother. Thought, perhaps, you might know, and asked if I had seen you.'

'Very well, then, I don't,' rejoined Hallaton, in tones that did not invite much discussion, 'and except through you am not likely to. Remember, I said, *all* the family;

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and now that subject is done with, tell me about yourself and how all the fellows are getting on down at Exeter.'

Perched on the top of a trunk, Dicky sat smoking and talking for some little time, but Hallaton was evidently so distrait and preoccupied that he cut his visit shorter than he had intended, promised Fred faithfully to comply with his last request, and then, with a hearty shake of the hand, bade him God-speed.

'It's odd—deuced odd,' muttered Mr. Chives, as he sauntered off in search of a hansom, 'that he shouldn't know. Where that unlicensed distiller and his wife have gone may be a mystery; but, hang it! it seemed as if he didn't know what had become of the fair Sarah either. Wife or no wife, he must surely know that. Well, I'll do my best, but it's not very likely, unless through the papers, I shall ever hear of that interesting family again.'

There were a good many people at this time much exercised in their minds as to what had become of the Mercers. To say nothing of the revenue officers, Mr. Lydney, Sam, Hallaton, &c., there were many others who, like Tootell, from sheer idle curiosity were anxious to see that problem solved. To none perhaps was the whole thing such a puzzle as to Sam Mercer. In his undemonstrative way he was fond of his parents. His father had always been a good father to him, although it must be fairly acknowledged that Sam had never been a trying son. He had made his own way early in life, and if he had more than once come down on the old man for an advance of money, it had been sheerly as capital wherewith to extend his business, and always faithfully repaid. The cordiality between father and son had been great. Both were shrewd, sharp men of business, ridiculing the idea of throwing away a point in the game. Good-hearted men both; but business was business, and when it came to that, softness, concession, or not endeavouring to get the best of your adversary, was simply to be derided. They were much alike both in temperament and principles; but, however it might have been in early days, old Joe Mercer had much greater greed of gold now than possessed his son. With his mother Sam had always been the favourite; his cool temper did not clash with hers, as did that of her fiery daughter. What had become of the old folks was

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a thing that troubled Sam Mercer sorely. Right or wrong, he meant to stand by them. He had no fear that they were in want of money; he knew that his father had a deal of property put by, one way and the other, and, unless he was apprehended, he felt pretty certain that no one but himself would be able to touch it.

It was not likely that so clever a man would have embarked on so risky a business without establishing a banking account in an assumed name far away from Exmouth.

With regard to Sarah it was somewhat different. Sam liked his sister, but had by no means the regard for her that he felt for his father and mother. He knew her thoroughly, and knew more of her escapades in Exmouth than a brother cares to hear of his sister being concerned in. Men may be lax enough in their own morals, but it makes their blood boil to hear a sister lightly spoken of, and perhaps the sting is all the more bitter when they know that she herself has given some grounds for it. Sam had lived much away from Exmouth since Sarah had been grown up, but he had more than once been maddened by the way he had heard her spoken of on his occasional visits home. He knew of her queer temper, and was quite aware of her ambitious views of marriage; but, democrat as his American travels had made him, Sam had always had his doubts on that point. He knew Hallaton, and from his turf experiences had cast that young gentleman's horoscope pretty correctly. He didn't give him credit for much money, and looked upon it that he was probably nearly through what little he had. He was a gentleman, and so far Sarah's ambition was gratified; but he felt pretty certain that his father would, at all events in the first instance, have to contribute to the support of the young couple. He knew quite well that Hallaton's friends were not likely to give him anything but the cold shoulder on account of such a marriage as this, and therefore he arrived at the conclusion that Sarah must be in communication with her father. He was quite aware of the girl's absurd idea that marrying a gentleman meant marrying a man with a liberal supply of money, and felt perfectly certain that Sarah would insist upon realising her new position in that wise.

There is a good deal of information to be picked up in

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the papers, even when people assure you that there is nothing in them. Some men have the faculty of running their eye over them and acquiring the pith of such journals as they peruse in marvellously short time, while others will pore over them by the hour and yet fail to note such subjects of interest as they may contain. The higher class of criminals and their natural enemies—the police—are, I fancy, quick and shrewd readers of the 'dailies.' So are dramatists and writers of fiction, and all of these may chance upon something which may serve their ends. Sam Mercer was accustomed to read his paper closely, and though the portion referring to his own immediate business claimed his first attention, yet he by no means confined himself exclusively to that. Glancing his eye one morning over the 'Naval and Military Intelligence,' he saw that Mr. Hallaton, of the Royal Artillery, had sailed for Bombay in the *Serapis*. That, he thought, must be the Mr. Hallaton he knew. It was curious that no mention was made of Mrs. Hallaton. However, he knew nothing of military matters; perhaps it was not the custom to include the names of ladies on these occasions. Still, he knew where to go for information; he would write to Mr. Chives and ask him if the Hallatons had sailed for India. He received an answer almost by return of post, 'Hallaton had sailed for Bombay in the *Serapis*, but whether Mrs. Hallaton had accompanied him Mr. Chives could not say.' Sam Mercer was puzzled; he had certainly failed to obtain any information from Dicky.

There was another man also a persistent reader of the papers, and to whom they had proved both interesting and instructive of late. If the description of the discovery of Mr. Tootell in the old ball-room at the Dragon had amused Sam Mercer, it may easily be guessed how it gratified Brent. That the prying old man had undergone some hours more imprisonment than was anticipated made Brent chuckle hugely. He had taken a great antipathy to the meddlesome old busybody, and was not a little pleased that his captivity had been prolonged considerably over the time to which, for their own safety, they had doomed him. Amongst other miscellaneous information, Brent's eye fell upon the railway accident in which the man of the name of Johnson figured amongst the list of 'seriously injured.

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This conveyed nothing to Brent. He had recognised the man at Exmouth, but had not taken the trouble to ascertain where or under what name he was living, but when, a little later, a paragraph headed 'End of a Notorious Burglar' caught his eye, and he read that the man of the name of Johnson had been identified by the London police as James Creasey, the burglar, it was a revelation to him. Creasey dead! His incubus removed! In spite of his being even then sought for by the myrmidons of the law, Brent felt like a free man again. What were the officers compared to Creasey on his trail? Stupid the dead burglar might have been, but he had a sort of dog-like faculty of tracking out Brent, however cunningly he might try to conceal himself. To this the intimate knowledge he had obtained of Brent's haunts and associates, combined with the fierce determination of the dead ruffian, doubtless contributed not a little.

This made a complete change in Brent's plans. One of his tenets was that there was no place like London, provided only you had money, for obliterating the traces of your footsteps. He had meant to stay there only a few weeks and then to make his way abroad; but Creasey's death, he thought, had done away with all necessity for that, and London was the safest place now in which they could lie *perdu* until the storm had blown over. Whatever he determined was of course law, for, shrewd though Joe Mercer might be, he was a perfectly lost man as soon as he was taken a few miles away from the place in which his life had been passed; while Mrs. Mercer was so utterly cowed, after all these years of respectability, at finding herself a criminal in the eye of the law, that providing her husband escaped the penalty of his transgression she was willing to assent to anything. Brent decided that Islington would afford them a quiet and convenient retreat for the present, and they were soon all three established in comfortable lodgings a little way off Upper Street. Here Brent considered there was little risk of their meeting any one from Exmouth who might know them, and Joe and his wife easily passed as quiet country people, who had come up to London for a bit of business. Brent himself posed as a relation who had just returned from abroad. He was far too experienced in the

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art of living in retirement not to know the necessity of giving some plausible story as to what you are and what your business is. To affect secrecy on those points is to excite suspicion, with the obvious result that your neighbours keep a vigilant eye on your movements.

'We can all walk about pretty much as we please here,' remarked Brent, when they had comfortably settled down. 'The only places I need caution you against are King's Cross and the Midland. You are liable, of course, to meet any one at a big railway station.'

Now, Sam Mercer occupied a snug little house in Bloomsbury, and sometimes, when his vocations did not take him to the neighbourhood of the Strand, beguiled his time by a stretch out Islington way. It was the dead season of the year, and Sam had a good deal of time on his hands just now. He was much puzzled as to what had become of his sister. He had written again to Mr. Chives to know if it was possible to ascertain whether Mrs. Hallaton had sailed with her husband in the *Serapis*. Dicky had promptly replied that he should think there was nothing easier; the Government agents would doubtless furnish him with a list of all those on board. Sam Mercer speedily ascertained that Mrs. Hallaton had not accompanied her husband. It was as he feared then, either there had been a violent quarrel between the two or else there had been no marriage, and as the latter thought presented itself to his mind the man's face darkened and his brows knit.

Moodily chewing the cud of such reflections, he strolled across to Islington one keen afternoon towards the end of the winter, and had just come to the conclusion that Sarah must have joined her parents, and that let him only discover them and he should at once be able to learn whether that marriage had taken place. Let Sarah have been only duly wedded, and whatever difference she might have had with her husband she was not likely to be chary of showing her marriage lines. Yes, if he could but discover his father! and as he muttered this to himself he arrived at Islington Green, and beheld, not thirty paces from him, that very individual!

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CHAPTER XXIII

SIR ROBERT'S WILL

THE doctor proved right in his prognostications. The fever gradually subsided, and left Mr. Lydney once more in full possession of his senses. Still, it was easy to see that something preyed upon his mind, and his anxiety to get back to business was palpable. This his medical man stoutly combated. He said it was perfectly imperative that the banker should have at least six weeks' rest; that his illness was obviously the result of overwork, and that unless he gave himself a thorough rest now he would only break down again in a short time, with perhaps permanent mental and physical injury to himself.

'Nobody, of course, Miss Lydney, can tell what cares a business man may have, though I should have thought that with such a well-established house as your father's he could easily afford to take a holiday. However, this is not a case of what he wishes, it is what he must do, and I'm sure any one of my professional brethren will endorse my verdict.' So the banker was condemned to inaction for the present, though, even as his daughter pointed out to him, it was not very clear what he could possibly do even had he been in robust health. That some papers of considerable importance were missing Mary knew, but she had also gathered that her father was completely nonplussed as to where to seek them. She did not know how long they had been missing, but she had learnt from the sick man's talk that it was necessary they should be recovered before very long, and, finding how much Mary knew, the banker determined to take her into his confidence and confess to her the whole of his troubles.

'Yes, Mary,' he said, 'unless these papers are discovered before six months are over, ruin and disgrace are staring me in the face. I and your grandfather made a terrible blunder many years ago; a very serious robbery was committed on the bank, and several deeds and securities stolen. The thief, sad to say, was a near and dear relation, and to

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shield him we hushed up a loss which ought at once to have been made public. I shall be called upon shortly to produce the missing deeds of a mortgage, and, when I'm obliged to confess that I cannot do so, others of my customers will doubtless demand their securities, and when I tell the story of their loss years ago nobody will believe me.'

'But I don't understand, papa. How could this loss have been kept a secret so many years? Surely people would expect to receive interest on their securities?'

'Certainly, and in those cases we paid it; in others they were deposited with us as security for money advanced. It has been a dead weight round my neck all my life, but the non-production of these mortgage deeds must be my ruin. The mortgagee, a shrewd, hard-headed man of business, is not likely to part with thirty thousand pounds without obtaining due possession of the deeds relating to the mortgage.'

Mary made no reply for some minutes. She might not know much about business, and she did know they were very comfortably off; still she was quite aware that the loss of thirty thousand pounds was a very serious thing for a country banker.

'But, papa,' she said at last, 'though it may mean ruin, I cannot see disgrace in all this—that is, to you.'

'Ah, it will be so,' replied Mr. Lydney, sadly; 'nobody will believe but what I have made away with all these missing securities. The robbery, as I told you, took place so long ago, and was so much hushed up at the time, that no one would credit the story now.'

'Yes, I do, papa, dear,' and Mary threw her arms round his neck and kissed him. 'You must not think that I am afraid of being poor, and I don't believe that any of the people here would listen to such a story against you.'

The banker shook his head as he stroked her hair fondly. He knew the world rather better than his daughter

Miss Lydney puzzled her head not a little over her father's story. She did not very clearly comprehend it all even yet, but her father could have told her that the case of a man making away with all securities committed to his charge, and paying interest on them for some years prior to

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the final smash, was by no means uncommon. She was afraid that they had been spending a good deal more money than they ought, for some time; however, she was guiltless on that point. Mr. Lydney liked to live well, and had put no stint on the housekeeping. She supposed they ought to begin to economise at once, and then Mary reflected ruefully that this was a point she had not thought of; then she idly took up the paper and gazed mechanically at the births, marriages, and deaths, while her mind was still busy turning over her father's strange story. Who and what was this relative to save whose name her father had apparently sacrificed himself? Suddenly a name caught her eye amongst the deaths that changed the whole current of her thoughts.

'On the 8th instant, at his seat in Kent, Sir Robert Hallaton, Bart., K.C.B., very suddenly, of apoplexy.'

So soon—and Mary Lydney would hardly have been a woman if she had not thought of what might have happened had it not been for that other. What did this mean, she wondered, to Fred? She was quite aware that nothing could prevent his inheriting the baronetcy, but from what she had heard her father say about the deceased Sir Robert she was afraid it would be nothing else. Angry though she was with Fred Hallaton, and sore as she was at his treatment of herself, she could not but feel sorry for him now. She was only guided by her father's opinion in believing that his marriage would cause his forfeiture of everything that the law did not compel his uncle to leave to him. Her father had said so many a time, and dwelt, when the news of Fred's escapade first came to his ears, on what it would probably cost him. She had often heard him assert that Sir Robert's property was entirely at his own disposal, and that he was of all men the least likely to condone such a marriage as his nephew had made. Had this marriage taken place? She knew very well that it was much doubted in the neighbourhood, and further that, marriage, or no marriage they were no longer believed to be living together. She was not a mercenary girl, and it was little thought of the poverty that she supposed to be coming upon them that made her muse dreamily over the thought of what might have been. Yes, she had cared a good deal for Fred Hallaton, and could have loved him very dearly,

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had he but spoken; and he would have spoken, she felt certain, if that treacherous wild-cat had not come between them. That she should think a little of the position that might have been hers was but natural. No woman could quite overlook the fact that to be Lady Hallaton, with a handsome income, would be rather a nice social standpoint. And now, poor Fred had thrown his prospects to the winds, and she supposed that publican's brazen daughter would, if not so at present, eventually be Lady Hallaton.

When she read this out to her father a little later he had once more much to say upon the subject. He remembered his old friend Bob Hallaton well, and though he had not met him for years still knew him quite well by reputation.

'Just the same domineering irascible fellow he was at Harrow, so all our old chums tell me. No, young Hallaton's mad marriage will prove his ruin. Bob Hallaton is just the sort of man who would hardly forgive his nephew marrying at all without consulting him, but the news that he had married an innkeeper's daughter would be sure to throw him into a furious passion. Poor young Hallaton won't find so much as a bough pot left him with the baronetcy. It's rough, and not quite right, to leave your heir nothing to sustain the position his title places him in, but it must be admitted that Fred Hallaton has given much provocation,' and then Mr. Lydney fell into a gloomy reverie, and became lost in speculation as to whether, if Sir Robert had lived some months longer, and young Hallaton had married Mary instead of levanting with Sarah Mercer, his deceased friend would have seen much difference between the daughter of a fraudulent banker aud that of a felonious publican.

The announcement of Sir Robert Hallaton's death sets tongues wagging once more all round the neighbourhood. Young Hallaton's elopement and the explosion at the Dragon Inn, after figuring as a nine days' wonder, have ceased to be talked about, but the death of his uncle brings the whole story once more before the public. That he is now the Baronet is patent to all, but it is only some of his intimate friends who are aware that the property is unentailed, and that Sir Robert had possessed full power to leave it as

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he liked. These were of Mr. Lydney's opinion, and made no doubt that Fred had come into the title, but nothing more. However, the question which exercised the neighbourhood chiefly was whether Sarah Mercer was or was not Lady Hallaton, and the prevalent opinion was in favour of the latter supposition.

The news speedily reached Fred in India, and was received by him with considerable indifference, so far as he personally was concerned. What was the use of this barren title to him? But for his passionate old uncle he felt sincere regret. If he had been rather dictatorial, the old man had always treated him with great kindness, and, though he had stormed at him, had helped him out of more than one scrape; but Fred had little hope that his last escapade had been forgiven; however, in this instance, he was destined to be not a little surprised. A few weeks later he received a letter from his uncle's lawyer, Mr. Kirk, which briefly informed him that Oaklands was bequeathed to him, together with the entire property, subject only to some trifling legacies, and requesting his instructions concerning the management of the property, till such time as Sir Frederick could arrive in England and make what arrangements seemed good to him in that respect. The letter further added that there was a handsome balance lying at his late uncle's bankers, against which he might draw should he be in want of money. Mr. Kirk did not think it necessary to inform him that his coming into Oaklands was due entirely to the suddenness of his uncle's death; that a fresh will, in which Fred was not even mentioned, was awaiting his signature when Sir Robert's life was so unexpectedly terminated.

Fred Hallaton at first could hardly believe in his good fortune, but there is something wonderfully prosaic and convincing in a lawyer's letter—that dry record of facts from which every tinge of humour or pathos is so studiously banished comes home to us at once as a stern reality, and astonished though he was, after perusing Mr. Kirk's letter for the second time, Fred had no doubt that he was the owner of Oaklands, and then the thought came drearily across him, what was the use of it to him now? For what good? Was he to go back to England and hail this handsome

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shrew, whose very memory he now detested, Lady Hallaton? Never! He had learnt by this that it was possible for a man to entertain two loves at the same time—the one a pure passion, the other a sensuous madness. The two cups had been placed before him, he had chosen the poison and drained the chalice to its dregs. No, he must obliterate himself. He had means to do so now, and he would do it. He would resign his profession, and, under an assumed name, wander about the world for the present; time enough to return to England when his marriage was a forgotten story, and those who still remembered it had accustomed themselves to the fact of himself and Lady Hallaton going their respective ways. He would write to his lawyers, and see that his wife had an allowance compatible with his improved position; and then—well, perhaps it would be best that they should never meet again in this world.

It was astonishing the difference the bitter disappointment of his marriage had made in Fred Hallaton. The gay haphazard subaltern of a few months ago had become a self-contained, reserved man. He who was once in the front of every frolic or gaiety that was going on now held himself aloof from his fellows. He was not morose, far from it; but he had acquired a gravity beyond his years. To those who had known him previously he would seem like a man whose youth had been prematurely quenched. He was pleasant and courteous enough upon such occasions as he was lured into society, but he entered into it sparingly, and nothing would have struck those he had known previously more than the difference between his gay gallantry towards women in England and the grave courtesy he displayed towards them in the East.

'Flirt!' pouted one of the most coquettish belles of Bombay; 'my dear, you might as well try to get up a flirtation with the Sphinx as with Sir Frederick Hallaton. Rest assured he has had one of such kind as serve a man for his lifetime.'

Fred thought the thing over for a day or two, and then, in pursuance of his resolution sent in his resignation, of his commission in Her Majesty's service, and, as soon as the telegraph informed him of its acceptance, he, to the surprise of his brother officers and acquaintances in Bombay, dis-

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pensed with the formality of farewell calls and disappeared without beat of drum.

It is a mistake not to read the papers attentively. Are there not constant invitations to people to call at given addresses and hear of 'something to their advantage,' and one never can say when one's own turn may come. Had Sarah Mercer studied the papers as closely as her brother was wont to do, she would have avoided the greatest mistake of her mistaken life.

CHAPTER XXIV

DICKY DOES ASCOT

'WELL, you fellows, I don't know how you feel; but with all due respect for the glitter of military glory, give me the dreamy quiet of a cathedral town. A field day in the long valley is no doubt imposing, but the end of it is you require a deal of washing both within and without. Here, waiter, "fill high the cup with Samian wine"—I mean, replenish the tankard.'

The speaker, Mr. Chives, bore on his person all the traces of having spent his morning in careering over the black dusty Aldershot moorland, for the troop of Horse Artillery to which he belonged had been moved down from Exeter to the big camp in April, and were now taking their part in all the mimic warfare of the spring season.

'Well, Dicky,' replied Thornton, the adjutant, 'you are doing your inner man very handsomely, and the sooner you attend to your outer the better. You look more like a sweep than a Christian at present.'

'Yes,' replied Chives, 'I don't think there's such dust anywhere as there is here. By the way, is there any news this morning? I was so late I had only just time to scramble on to parade.'

'Nothing much,' replied Thornton. 'The colonel had a line from headquarters this morning, and it seems Fred Hallaton has retired.'

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'The deuce he has!' rejoined Chives; 'then I suppose he will be soon back in England again.'

'Can't say about that; our people make no mention of his movements.'

'No, not likely,' replied Chives; 'and now I'll go and cleanse myself.'

Mr. Chives meditated as he walked across to his quarters over his old chum's retirement, his thoughts at once taking a very practical form. It was just possible, he thought, that this might mean that Fred had not been altogether disinherited, but had been left some small portion of Sir Robert's handsome income. However, he was pretty sure to see him before long. Mr. Chives, in spite of his objurgations of Aldershot and its dust, was really looking forward to having an exceedingly good time there. It was the very centre of racing. Did not Epsom, Ascot, Sandown, &c., all lie quite handy to it? and Chives knew that the authorities usually allowed liberty to attend those carnivals, and a day's racing was to Chives a day of pure and unmitigated enjoyment.

Ascot! How the very name recalls the very gayest week in all the year! What man fond of racing has not bright memories of sunny days at the royal meeting? Pleasant it always is, pleasant it is now, when we have numbered more summers than we quite care to own to—but oh, to look back upon the mad merry revel it was

> When our days were all before us,
> And our years were twenty-two;

when we laughed at our reverses, and the afternoon was a mixture of mirth, lunch, gossip, and flirtation!

Two or three weeks slipped by, and Chives finds himself, to his intense satisfaction, assisting at the famous gathering. Nobody is ever astonished really at meeting any one at Ascot. Old friends who haven't seen each other for years stumble across one another on the lawn, or meet accidentally in some of the hospitable tents which extend unlimited lunch to the friends and acquaintances of their proprietors. In the course of the first afternoon Chives ran across his old friend Dr. Nicholls, and, as was only natural, the Mercers and Fred Hallaton came under discus-

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sion. However, neither could contribute anything new upon the subject. They both agreed that the Mercers had made good their retreat, but that until Hallaton's return to England nobody was likely to be enlightened much concerning him and the fair Sarah.

'You remember,' said the doctor, 'I told you Hallaton didn't quite understand the sort of young lady he was flirting with. He does by this, though, and you may depend upon it that they have separated, never to come together again.'

'I haven't run across Sam Mercer as yet,' remarked Chives; 'but then I've not been into Tattersall's ring. Of course he is here.'

'Oh, yes,' replied Nicholls. 'I've seen him several times. By the way, you told me about your meeting him in London, and his being as much in the dark as any of us about what had become of his family. I can't say for certain, but I think he knows where his father and mother are now.'

'Why, he wouldn't tell you if he did,' said Chives. 'What on earth makes you think so?'

'It is mere guesswork, but if I am right it is the rummiest start you ever heard of. Nobody but Sam would ever have thought of such a thing.'

'What does he say about the Hunt Cup?' asked Chives; 'that's more to the point just now.'

'He told me, from all he can hear, the favourite has been so well tried, and, in such a clever stables, that, with any luck, it ought to win. The gentlemen, too, are having a good deal the best of the battle so far, as favourite after favourite has won.'

Having cordially invited the doctor to come and lunch after the race at their drag, Mr. Chives hastened into the outer ring, and made his modest investment in accordance with the bookmaker's judgment, and then hurried across the course to gain a vantage coign on the top of the regimental coach, from which to see the race. The bookmaker's opinion was fully justified, and Chives had the satisfaction of seeing his money cleverly landed.

The doctor duly turned up for lunch, and that meal having been satisfactorily concluded, including perhaps an

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extra libation to the health of the noble animal by whose victory they had profited, the twain started off to see Sam Mercer and thank him for his tip.

'I know where to find him,' said Nicholls; 'he'll be at the back of the iron stand, snatching a hasty snack during the luncheon hour, in company with many of his fraternity. It's rather rough on 'em, but a bookmaker who is doing big business can't spare much time for a snack, and of all the vile eatables ever concocted nothing beats a racecourse sandwich.'

'No, they are not nice,' replied Chives; 'make them the week before I should say, and they petrify as the meeting draws to a close. But here's Sam Mercer.'

'How d'ye do, Mr. Chives,' said the bookmaker. 'Glad to see you here, sir. It's a rare good meeting for you gentlemen, but as for us we don't seem to be able to turn a trick.'

'Afraid the last was a bad race for you,' replied Chives, 'though the doctor told me you said it would win.'

'Quite right; and it did,' replied Mercer; 'but of course I had to lay all my book against it. If you don't stick invariably to that, you had better give up the business before the business gives you up. No, the run is against us just now, but the figures are bound to come out right in the end.'

They had wandered a little way from the refreshment booth, and, previously prompted by Nicholls, Chives said quietly, 'I've got nothing to tell you, Mercer, but you remember our talk at the Victoria Club some months ago?'

'Yes,' rejoined the bookmaker, anxiously, 'and you've heard nothing of Sarah, have you?'

'No. I said I had nothing to tell you, but I thought perhaps you might have heard of your father, at all events.'

'Never fear, sir, the old 'un's all right; he's of a sort bound to come through. Do I know where he is? No, I don't,' and there was a comical twinkle in the bookmaker's eye. It ain't, you see, convenient that his dearest relations should know where such an audacious defrauder of the Queen's revenues has betaken himself just now; but I'll tell you what, gentlemen—now, Mr. Chives, you and some of your brother officers are very likely fond of a little flutter in the double and treble event way, such as the French list houses

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are always offering to the public—those thousand-sovereign-to-one chances, which are so dazzling, and come off once in a lifetime reg'lar if you only live long enough. Now, if ever you want anything in that way, you give Pebbles & Son, of Boulogne, a turn. I am English correspondent for that firm, and can guarantee the business will be quite genuine.'

For a minute or two Chives looked puzzled, but then he caught the twinkle in the doctor's eye, glanced back at the grin upon Sam Mercer's face, and the truth flashed upon him at once. He burst into a roar of laughter, in which his two companions most heartily joined. There was something so ludicrous in the idea, but there could be no doubt about it. The absconding Joe Mercer had fled across the Channel, and with his fraudulent gains started as a betting-list keeper under his son's auspices on the other side.

'Well, gentlemen, I must be off,' exclaimed Sam Mercer. 'It looks about the worst meeting we have had for a long time; but no matter. Now and again the bank is broke at Homburg and those places, but the ring has never been broke yet, often as it has been talked about.'

'Now,' said the doctor, as Sam walked away, 'what do you think of that? Old Joe Mercer knows no more about racing than the town pump. All the better for the business Sam set him up in. When it comes to figures his head is clear enough, and that's all he has got to give his mind to Why, as you know, there's hundreds of sovereigns and five-pound notes perpetually crossing the water to these Boulogne list houses for this treble-event business. The senders are tempted by the apparently tremendous long odds they are offered. It's all straight enough, and they book up like men when they lose; but, dear me, how precious seldom that happens to them!'

'Not much of that,' rejoined Chives, meditatively, as they strolled back to the lawn, and that light-hearted officer recalled to memory a good many sovereigns of his and his allies that had been despatched to those insinuating Boulogne list-makers, but had never borne fruit.

When Sam Mercer came across his father on Islington Green he naturally accompanied the old man to his lodgings, and was then made acquainted with the fact that Brent

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proposed they should live quietly there until the hue-and-cry after them had died away, but to this Sam stoutly objected. He pointed out that it was all very well for Brent, who knew London well, and was thoroughly versed in playing at hide-and-seek with the law; but that his father knew nothing of the ways of the big city, that to the quick eye of either a cockney or a policeman his father was unmistakably 'a countryman'; that this alone was sufficient to draw attention to him—in short, that he saw no safety for his father in England. Brent, of course, could do as he liked. Sam was so urgent in his representations that at last the old man consented to be guided by him in this matter.

'Let you but fall into the hands of the law,' said Sam, 'and you will find yourself mulcted of all you possess. Your imprisonment might not be long, but you would find yourself at the end of it without a shilling to begin the world again upon. Now go across the Channel, and I will accompany you, and stay for a few days till you are all comfortably settled down. I can't speak their lingo, but I know my way about their country. I've been over there professionally more than once.'

Sam accordingly transplanted his parents across the Channel, and did not leave them until he had established them in a quiet little house at Boulogne. At first Joe Mercer was much amused by the change; it was at all events much brighter and more lively than living in Islington, but before long he grew very weary of having nothing to do. He had been a busy man all his life, and the idea of idling away his time, instead of endeavouring to make money, fretted him dreadfully, and at length he wrote a somewhat querulous letter to his son, in which he complained of his lack of occupation. It was then that Sam conceived the brilliant idea of starting him as a betting-list keeper. Sam once more ran over to Boulogne for a few days, rapidly initiated his father into the business, and Joe Mercer at once started as Pebbles & Son.

As for Mr. Chives, he brought four capital days' racing to a most satisfactory conclusion, and with some reservation, perhaps, as regards Newmarket, was more than ever convinced that 'with a drag, a pleasant party, and a fine Ascot, you got as near to perfect happiness as is permitted to us on this earth.'

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CHAPTER XXV

AN AUNT'S LEGACY

'DAMN the woman!' almost screeched Sir William Wrensley. 'She's old, she's a bore, she's ugly, and a nuisance! What do I keep a housekeeper for, except to spare me the bother of managing the servants, and here she comes to me with a face as long as my arm to tell me, and in my state of health, that the cook is incompetent! Incompetent! The woman is not fit to cook food for a cat, much less a Christian. I've told Mrs. Thomson so fifty times. Why the devil doesn't she get somebody who can cook, instead of coming to me to say this woman can't? No, till my aunt left me three thousand a year, *and* her housekeeper Mrs. Thomson, I never properly understood what a legacy meant. However, I've made up my mind Thomson goes. I'll do the liberal thing by Thomson. Like myself she shall retire on a comfortable pension. Hang me if I don't go in for a lady-housekeeper! She'll have h's, and be pleasant to talk to, I suppose. As for Thomson, she's an h-less, angular, bombazine-swathed, acidulated, incompetent old woman!'

So spoke that rather dyspeptic and irascible retired servant of Her Majesty's Indian Civil Service, Sir William Wrensley, the morning after an unsatisfactory dinner, and a stormy interview with that painful woman, 'his aunt's legacy.' This wealthy *malade imaginaire*, who lived in a state of chronic irritability, produced by the constant use of high-spiced dishes on a not altogether sound digestion, was the cynosure of all eyes in the quiet little watering-place of Canmouth. Like most places of the kind its residents were mostly people with no occupation, who found time hang rather heavily on their hands. The amusements of Canmouth were not very distracting, and its inhabitants had considerable leisure for noting the doings of their neighbours. The advent of Sir William Wrensley caused quite a commotion in the little place. The new-comer was wealthy, whimsical, and irritable, and his vagaries formed quite a topic of conversation. He was fashioned after the manner of the old

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Nabob that we read of in the early days of the century. He had spent most of his life in India, in high command, and a man who has been administering the government of districts about five times the size of Yorkshire is apt to become somewhat arbitrary in his ideas. He gave out that he was residing in Canmouth for his health, a thing he had never been solicitous about before, the fact being that he was suffering from the enforced idleness consequent on his retirement. Thomson had acted as a perpetual blister on him since his return to England, and the only wonder was that he had borne with his aunt's legacy so long.

It was perhaps the old story that a man who can be stern and decisive enough in dealing with men sometimes displays considerable vacillation in dealing with the other sex. Be that as it may, Sir William stood firm to his resolution on this occasion, and informed Mrs. Thomson most emphatically that they must part at the end of a month, and then proceeded to turn over this new maggot that had got into his brain. The idea of lady-helps and of lady-housekeepers had much struck him. Thomson's harsh voice, stiff bombazine, and unsympathetic manner were, as he said, a perpetual irritant. He detested speaking to her; and yet he was a man who liked to hold much counsel with his housekeeper in the morning, and give her very precise directions with regard to his dinner. What, indeed, was he to do with his mornings unless he had that important festival to take thought about? He would try it; he would advertise for a lady-housekeeper. She couldn't be more incompetent than Thomson, whose ideas seemed limited to fish and a joint, and she would be pleasant to talk to.

So he put an advertisement in the papers to the effect that such a lady was wanted, and rapidly received some half-a-dozen answers in reply. When Mrs. Thomson became cognisant of her master's proceedings (and I often wonder whether there is anything our servants don't know about us), her features broke into an acidulated smile, and she remarked to herself, 'Ho! ho! that's it, is it? The old fool! He had better have written straight to the "Matrimonial News" at once.'

However, Sir William having duly read and considered his answers picked out the two that seemed the most eligible,

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and appointed an interview with their writers at his own house.

The first-comer was a limp, faded woman, who bore, even to Sir William's unpractised eye, the aspect of a lady who had seen better days, had taken to letting lodgings, and been doing very badly at that for some time past. This was not in the least what he wanted, and the applicant was politely dismissed. But the second lady, a Mrs. Melrose, almost took his breath away when she was announced—a tall handsome young woman attired in the deepest mourning, who swept into the room with the utmost self-possession.

Yes, she said, in answer to his question, she was an applicant for the situation. She did not profess to cook, but she did profess to manage a household. She did profess to see that the cook as well as all the other female servants did their duty thoroughly, and, if he gave her authority, she would take care that, if the servants were not fitted for their work, they should be replaced by others who were, without his being troubled about the change.

This suggestion struck Sir William most forcibly. Mrs. Thomson was perpetually whining to him about the offences of refractory housemaids, and though rather staggered by the fact that Mrs. Melrose did not cook, still she so confidently assumed that it would not be expected of her that he thought probably it was not customary with lady-housekeepers; and lastly, and perhaps chiefly, dazzled by Mrs. Melrose's personal appearance, he consented to give her a trial, and it was settled that she should succeed Mrs. Thomson that day week.

Although Mrs. Thomson was going into comfortable retirement, she nevertheless felt all the hostility of her class towards her successor, and darkly insinuated that Mrs. Melrose was no better than she should be; that she should like to see her recommendations, &c.—and, in good truth, Sir William, too, was a little anxious on that point. He felt that he had been somewhat precipitate. Mrs. Melrose had neither produced nor alluded to having any such things in her possession. She had said briefly that she was the widow of an officer, that she had been accustomed to the management of a good-sized establishment, but that she had never taken such a situation before; in short, Sir William was fain to

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confess that he really knew nothing at all about her, and that he was confiding the charge of his establishment to a young woman chiefly on the grounds of her good looks.

During the last week of her residence in office Mrs. Thomson paved the way for Mrs. Melrose with the tradespeople to the best of her ability; that is to say, she insinuated as much as she dared against her successor, to which the butcher, the baker, the grocer, &c., listened with all the avidity they would to any other gossip. But if Mrs. Thomson thought she was going to do Mrs. Melrose much harm in this wise she was very much mistaken, for those respectable tradesmen cared considerably more about Sir William Wrensley's custom than they did about the morality of his housekeeper; moreover, Mrs. Thomson, although undoubtedly most respectable, had been by no means popular If she shut her eyes to the plundering of her master, she was also exacting in her pound of flesh, and when the housekeeper's blackmail had been accounted for, the tradesmen were bound to confess that Sir William was not such an out-of-the-way good customer after all. Mrs. Thomson remained but one night after the arrival of her successor, but even during that time she found an opportunity to overhaul Mrs. Melrose's wardrobe; but no, she could make nothing of that, her linen was all marked 'S.M.' There was neither letter nor paper that could give the spiteful, inquisitive woman the slightest hint of anything wrong. One thing only did she discover, and even this seemed so trivial that Mrs. Thomson hardly allowed her mind to dwell on it. Picking up a piece of brown paper, in which apparently shoes or something of that kind had been wrapped, she saw, clearly written on the inside of the paper, 'Miss Mercer,' nothing more, no address; and even Mrs. Thomson dismissed that from her mind as not worth another thought.

That Canmouth should, so to speak, bristle with excitement at the appearance of Sir William's handsome housekeeper was quite natural. No one could have been quieter or more retiring than she was; but, for all that, Mrs. Melrose was bound to appear in the town in the fulfilment of her duties, and on the parade occasionally in pursuit of health. Then Mrs. Melrose was further a constant churchgoer, and though she kept her crape veil down a good deal,

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yet it was as transparent as was possible for a crape veil to be, and moreover, of course, she could not help raising it occasionally. The youth of Canmouth pronounced her a 'tip-topper,' gentlemen more advanced in years declared that such a foot and ankle hadn't been seen on the parade for ages, while the ladies admitted dubiously that 'she was handsome, if you admired that bold, flashy sort of beauty,' but that for their part they admired something a little less pronounced, something not quite so self-assertive, which in this case was rank injustice, for Mrs. Melrose went her way quietly and most unostentatiously, courting no admiration, and giving no man a pretext for addressing her. But if there was one thing Sir William had shown conclusively it was that he stood in no awe of the opinion of Canmouth; he had been left a furnished house there, but had by no means made up his mind to settle there for good, and had been too long king of his own country to pay much deference to public opinion. His new housekeeper suited him exactly; quiet, tolerably ladylike, and soft spoken, she stepped into her new position at once, and showed exceeding tact in never overstepping it in the slightest degree. She fully bore out her assertion that if she could not cook she could at all events govern his household. She ruled them with a firm and steady hand, and Sir William had never known the domestic machine work so smoothly before. His admiration for his housekeeper increased daily; he had never thought about marriage before, but he found himself arguing with himself the pros and cons of taking a wife at his time of life, and if so, why shouldn't he please himself? He had no relations that he cared about; he was, what with his pension, his savings, and his aunt's bequest, a man very comfortably off, in a position to make any woman he liked Lady Wrensley. His manner became somewhat more marked towards Mrs. Melrose, and that lady received his attentions with the most inimitable tact. Still adhering closely to her rôle of housekeeper, she let him see that she was perfectly aware of them, and acknowledged them with just a shade of coquetry in her manner that Sir William found irresistible.

Another week or two and the handsome housekeeper saw that her master was quite within the toils. Still, she was very chary of giving him encouragement, playing her fish

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with infinite patience, and determined not to lose him by undue precipitancy. Even when Sir William spoke at last, and plainly and unmistakably asked her to be his wife, she was quite equal to the occasion. She thanked him for the honour he had done her, and begged him to take a day to think over it. 'In any case, Sir William,' she concluded, 'I shall have to leave you. It would be impossible for me to remain here as your housekeeper after what has passed, and if I am to be your wife I must resign my present post and reside somewhere by myself until you choose to claim me.' Sir William slept on it, but the morrow saw no change in his determination, and it was settled that Mrs. Melrose should take her departure on the following day, take up her residence somewhere in the neighbourhood, and that after a month's interval Sir William should bring her back to Canmouth as Lady Wrensley. The self-styled Mrs. Melrose had indeed a good many preparations to make before committing deliberate bigamy. She had, she flattered herself, disappeared and left no trace behind her. She had drawn only twice upon her husband's allowance since their separation, and now for some months it had been accumulating in his solicitor's hands. She had buried herself in a quiet country place not very far from Canmouth, there to think over things and to determine what her course of life should be in the future.

'I'll live my own life,' she said sullenly to herself. 'I'll not be the wife of a pauper husband, nor of one who is ashamed to introduce me to his friends. From this hour I renounce his name, and will never call myself by it again.'

In her retirement she had seen no papers; not that even in her old Exmouth days anything but the local journal had ever had the slightest interest for the fair Sarah. She was consequently not even sure that her husband had sailed for India, and in total ignorance that she was Lady Hallaton, and that Fred was now well off and a baronet.

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CHAPTER XXVI

BAREFACED BIGAMY

CLEVER woman though Sarah might be, she was as yet with limited experience. She had still to learn, in these days of universal travel, how very small the world is; that, though nothing is easier than to change your name, it is a very different matter to destroy your identity. She did not overlook that there would probably be inquiries as to what had become of Mrs. Hallaton, that sooner or later her husband might be desirous of knowing whether she was alive or dead—of knowing, at all events, what she was doing and how she was living; it might be, like herself, that he would wish to marry again, and be anxious, if possible, to ascertain that he was free to do so. She saw clearly enough that her disappearance and abstention from drawing her allowance would be no convincing proof to anyone that she was no longer alive, and that should Fred arrive at the contemplation of a second marriage a searching inquiry would probably be made concerning her. So far she had been successful. She had disappeared, and she firmly believed that where she was and what she was doing were known to nobody. But it was necessary, she considered, that she should die—not actually, of course, but that the intimation of her death, and a certificate thereof, should be furnished to Fred Hallaton's solicitors. How this was to be done was the problem she was now considering. It was not easy, she knew. No medical man would venture to give the certificate of a death that had not taken place, even supposing that she could find an unscrupulous practitioner open to a bribe. How was she to furnish proof of her own demise?

She was a cunning, resolute woman, and quite determined to become Lady Wrensley, and that, she thought, was easy. She did sometimes wonder that Sir William had not inquired more closely into her previous history; but he was very much in love, and she was conscious that she could turn him round her little finger. He had asked

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her very few questions about her antecedents, and had rested quite satisfied with the fact that her husband had been an officer of the artillery, and that she had lost him little more than a year ago. One mistake which she had very nearly fallen into had taught her to be very guarded about any reference to this fictitious past of hers. She had spoken of her husband having died in India, but Sir William's rapid exclamation, 'Ah, you've been in India, then?' warned her of what a pitfall she had been on the verge of. Had she said yes, her total ignorance of the manners and customs of the country must have at once betrayed her. She hastened to explain that she was to have followed him there, but that his unexpected death after a few months' residence in the country had, sad to say, rendered it needless; and from that hour Sarah kept strict watch over her tongue whenever her antecedents were in question. Sir William was not suspicious, and had readily accepted her story. Fred Hallaton had gone to India, had told her bitterly that his ill-starred marriage had ruined him, and that he had no wish to see England again for many a long day. It was not likely they would ever come across each other again, and he was little likely, she thought, to question the report of her death. No; let her only manage that matter of the death certificate, and she thought she ran little risk of the identity of Sarah Hallaton with Susan Melrose ever being discovered. Sir William's intention, she knew, was, as soon as his health was restored, to establish himself in London, and to this resolution she determined to hold him. As for his ill-health, she was quite aware that that was purely imaginary; indeed, since he had fallen in love with herself Sir William had pretty well forgotten his ailments.

Sarah, indeed, was intoxicated by her own success. It had been a case of I came, saw, and conquered, and with such transparent ease that her confidence in her attractions was unbounded. What a fool she had been! Down in that quiet little watering-place in which her life had been passed, she had never recognised what opportunities there were in the world for a handsome woman like herself who had brains and was not troubled with principle. She had thought it a great thing to marry a subaltern in the army.

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And now she saw how very much better she might have done. No matter. She was not going to let that mistake stand in her way. She would be married as soon as the month was up. And then, let them go where they might in the first place, London was her ultimate mark. She would not return to Canmouth; she knew quite enough of Society's ways to be aware that nobody would notice her there. She knew very little of London; but she had learnt this much—that a man in her husband's position, having command of money, could with tact make his way into society of some sort. During the interval that elapsed between her leaving Sir William's house and her marriage, Sarah, to speak metaphorically, was busied in burying herself and erecting a tombstone to her own memory. How she managed to effect this will appear later on, but suffice it to say that Hallaton's solicitors were forwarded a certified copy taken from the register of Shillingford parish church, to the effect that Susan Melrose had died and been buried there about two months previously. This was accompanied by a letter purporting to come from the medical man who had attended her in her illness, and who said that he wrote at her request; that the dying woman had desired him to obtain this certificate after her decease, and had further informed him that her real name was Sarah Hallaton, that she was separated from her husband, with whom she had quarrelled, that their marriage had been all a mistake, that she forgave him for her own part, and was making him the best atonement she could for her own faults by releasing him from his bondage. The letter was signed 'Robert Burdett.'

It did not occur to Hallaton's solicitors to doubt the authenticity of these documents. The most conclusive evidence in their eyes was the fact that the allowance they had been instructed to pay monthly had for some months been no longer drawn. True, they had always forwarded the order for this allowance to Mrs. Hallaton, at the post-office, Shillingford; but for all that it was very possible she was living there under an assumed name. At all events they saw no reason for further inquiry into the matter at present.

At the time originally fixed, Sarah went through a form of marriage with Sir William and became Lady

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Wrensley. She scrawled her name as Susan Melrose in the vestry with as much *sangfroid* as if it really belonged to her. She was not a woman whose nerve was likely to fail her at any part of her career, and after a brief trip to Paris they returned to London, and at once commenced to look round for a house. This was speedily found in the neighbourhood of Tyburnia, and then Sarah at once proceeded to look about for a cook. She wanted no ordinary performer, but a first-class artist, and having procured that, she intended that Lady Wrensley's dinners should be, before long, the talk of the town. She had a natural talent for organisation, and her servants stood in considerable awe of their imperious mistress. She was apt to learn, and had a very retentive memory. Sir William was a bit of a gourmet, and therefore admirably well fitted to aid her in her plans. As soon as her establishment was running smoothly to her satisfaction, Lady Wrensley urged her husband to look up some of his old friends. Proud of his beautiful wife, and hospitable as an Arab, Sir William was nothing loth. He had married late in life, it is true, but Lady Wrensley was a woman who, he thought, would take his old chums by surprise. From the high official position he had held in India Sir William had a large circle of acquaintance. Many of these were only too glad to welcome him to England, and on finding out where he had pitched his tent, promptly called. Amongst these Sir William's bride produced no little sensation. Who the deuce she was, nobody seemed to know, but there was no denying the fact that Lady Wrensley was an exceedingly handsome woman, and that old Wrensley's dinners were things to dream about. Again and again the question was asked, who was she, and many and wild were the conjectures on that point. 'Where did Wrensley pick her up?' was a common enough question amongst his intimates, changed at times for the cynical variation of 'Where did she pick up old Wrensley?' But Sir William and his wife kept their own counsel, and further than that the consensus of public opinion proclaimed her to have been a widow, no one professed to know anything at all about her. Even on this point their assumed knowledge amounted to no more, no mention was ever made of her previous name

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Slowly but steadily Sarah wormed her way into society. Wherever she went she was sure to be noticed as a striking and handsome woman. She bid fair before long to become quite the rage. The men said she was great fun, so free and unconventional; and though the women at times agreed with one another that, whoever Lady Wrensley might have been, she wasn't quite a lady, yet the proclaiming of such an opinion would have been ascribed to jealousy. Still, if to a close observer the deficiencies of Sarah's early training occasionally peeped out, yet she had picked up the usages of society wonderfully well. One thing that stood her in good stead was her great self-possession. Nothing ever flurried her, and even when conscious of having committed some solecism she was perfectly undisconcerted and would laugh it off, saying that she really had lived so much out of the world of late that she had almost forgotten how to behave. On the whole, when she left town with her husband for the autumn holidays, Lady Wrensley had good cause to be satisfied with her first season. She had met no one who had recognised her, she had never heard the slightest allusion to her husband, nor had she any news of her own family; in short, Sarah had ceased to remember that there was any danger in the rôle she was playing, and that the risk of her exposure was ever existent.

Sir William, too, was fairly satisfied with his marriage. He was proud of the admiration his wife excited, pleased with the way in which she ruled his *ménage*, and if Lady Wrensley was a little disposed to flirtation she did not go so far as to cause him any uneasiness; but he was sometimes troubled by the questions of his old friends as to who Lady Wrensley was. True, such qnestions were easy to baffle, but it always brought back to his mind the fact that he really knew so little about her himself. About her first husband and her past life Lady Wrensley never could be induced to speak. Further, he had already discovered that Sarah had a most imperious temper, and was fain to confess that in the few disputes that had arisen between them the lady had most resolutely carried her point. He, who had ruled more than one province in India, was conscious that, like many other eminent rulers, he, in his turn, was

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ruled by a woman. He had rather chafed at first, but on the whole was fairly reconciled to Sarah's despotism after a little. Lady Wrensley's temper, too, improved greatly in her prosperity. As Becky Sharp remarks, 'it is easy to be good on ten thousand a year,' and it certainly is easier to keep one's temper when rich than poor.

It was getting now close upon two years since Fred Hallaton had carried Sarah Mercer off with him to London, and for more than a twelvemonth no word of him had been heard by anybody, unless, perhaps, it was Mr. Kirk, and that gentleman was not given to talk of either his clients or their affairs Fred Hallaton, indeed, was well-nigh forgotten by his little world. Here and there one of his old chums would wonder what had become of him, but from the time he threw up his commission and left India nothing certain was known of him. He was believed to be in Australia, but there were almost as good grounds for supposing him to be in Japan or anywhere else. There were, however, three people who kept a keen look-out for news of him, and, strange to say, Lady Wrensley, in spite of all she had at stake, was not one of them. Dicky Chives, Sam Mercer, and Mary Lydney kept vigilant eyes on the papers to see if they could pick up any news of the missing man.

CHAPTER XXVII

LYDNEY AND SON SUSPEND PAYMENT.

THE crash has come at last, and the shutters are up at the old-established bank of Lydney and Son. The redemption of the mortgage proved, as the banker had foreseen, fatal. Unable to produce the deeds, he was forced to explain the cause and confess that they had been stolen thirty years ago. The news spread like wildfire; the lawyers gave their clients hints that if they had any securities deposited at Lydney and Son's it would be as well to inquire after them, and the result was that in many cases, although the interest had been paid

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on them for years the securities themselves were not forthcoming. People shook their heads, and said it was improbable that such a robbery should have been kept a secret; that it was more likely the securities had been realised, and the interest on them paid regularly, simply to conceal the felony. What motive could Mr. Lydney and his father, who was then alive, have had in hushing such a thing up? If they had announced their loss to the public at the time, it would have been credible: a list of the stolen deeds and securities could have been published far and wide, which would have made them at all events difficult to negotiate. Then there were cases during all these years in which the proprietors had sought to realise their stocks and shares, and on these occasions Mr. Lydney had always disposed of them for his clients, and placed the full market value of such stocks and shares to their account. How had this been done? Clearly the bank must have paid the requisite sum from their own resources. In short, people hinted that the inquiry which must take place, would probably disclose a gigantic scheme of fraud extending over many years, and a state of rottenness in the business that people would hardly believe possible.

That rumours like these should produce a run upon the bank was a matter of course, and as the tongues of those who found their securities among the missing were unchained there was quite a panic in the town, and the depositors, big and small, hastened to withdraw such money as they might have there. Owners of securities in the first instance had kept their own counsel, hoping to get their own again before the news spread. But when they found their shares amongst the missing, and were only met with such a pitiful story as this robbery of thirty years ago, what need was there to keep further silence on the subject? The banker, too, gave ample handle to the accusation of fraud by making even now only a half-confession. Loyal as ever to that brother whom he had endeavoured to shield at the time, he did not disclose the real motive for the inexplicable silence he and his father had thought proper to maintain concerning this robbery. Had he confessed that it was to shield a younger brother that they had kept silence about their losses, people could have understood it: they might have

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acted wrongly, imprudently, but at all events they would have had a strong reason to plead in their justification. There were not many now in Exmouth who recollected the absconding of young Lydney, and that speedily hushed-up rumour that he had robbed the bank before his flight; and the banker ever since had been especially careful that nothing should recall it to men's minds.

Over and over again had Mr. Lydney, in the past years, looked ruefully back upon the weakness that had led his father to insist upon saving his younger son from the consequence of his misdeeds. At the time he had willingly concurred in, if possible, shielding the delinquent, and he is destined even yet before he dies to discover how grave a mistake it was they made. He wonders to himself that the secret of the robbery should have been kept so long. He has been sorely driven at times to find the money necessary for its preservation when some client has unexpectedly desired to realise securities placed in charge of the bank. The Lydneys were a proud family, and had always carried their heads high in Exmouth. It would have been a sore disgrace to them to have had the cadet of the family branded as 'thief' on the outset of his life. Remember, too, mankind is weak. Are we not ever and again astonished at how long blackmail has been sometimes paid because the luckless victim had not the courage to face a court of law in the first instance?

Mr. Lydney met the run against his bank gallantly enough the first day, but that showed him conclusively that the case was hopeless; and without further effort he suspended payment the next morning, and announced that books and assets would be promptly placed in the hands of whoever the creditors might think fit to appoint, and that he hoped, granted a little breathing-time, there would be found sufficient funds to pay everybody in full. Exmouth shook their heads gloomily over this announcement. Was not that what men always said when they failed, and did not such hopes constantly result in a final dividend of two or three shillings in the pound, and was there not his own admission to the effect that the business had been a gigantic fraud for years? Still, there was no more to be said. Mr. Lydney made no attempt to abscond; whatever his misdoings he was

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there to abide by them, even should the result be a public trial and imprisonment; and many of the quidnuncs pointed out that more than one banker had paid such penalty for his malpractices.

Mary Lydney was in sore trouble. That the bank should suspend payment was a heavy blow to her; she had hoped that might have been averted; that they would have to reduce their expenditure and live in comparative poverty she was prepared to expect, but that the bank which she looked upon as an institution woven up with her whole life should be closed was very painful to her. She and her father had many true friends inExmouth, who not only thoroughly sympathised with them in the misfortune that had overwhelmed them, but who adhered stoutly to their belief in the banker's probity. Weak and foolish he might no doubt have been, but they steadfastly refused to listen to the story of his dishonesty. Even humble acquaintances would venture to stop her, and with a touch of their hats inquire after Mr. Lydney's health when Mary appeared abroad. Amongst these was Mr. Tootell, who was not only persistent in his humble inquiries, but invariably bade her be of good cheer, telling her she might be quite certain that no one who knew Mr. Lydney could help feeling sure that his misfortune was quite unmerited, and that he had the sympathies of the entire town. Now, Miss Lydney knew this to be untrue, she was far too sensible a girl not to know that there were even acquaintances of their own who were exulting in her father's downfall, and saying very hard things concerning him. But it was reserved for the garrulity of Mr. Tootell to bring to her notice what nobody as yet had had the cruelty to speak of to her. In her distress, poor girl, she felt so grateful for sympathy and kindness that her heart rather melted to that gossiping old mischief-maker. She accused herself of having judged him hardly in bygone days, and therefore submitted gracefully to his persistent and rather wearying solicitude as to her father's health. But her heart stood still, and she turned pale as a sheet, when one morning he supplemented his usual inquiries by saying:

'Be of good cheer, miss, never you mind what they say. I tell you they can't bring your father to trial. They ain't

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got no evidence against him, and I don't know, but I rather think I've had some experience of the law lately :' and here Mr. Tootell pulled up his shirt-collar and assumed his favourite pose when in the act of retailing any particular spicy bit of gossip that he had gathered.

'Bring my father to trial!' gasped Mary, 'who dares to hint at such a thing?' And her eyes flashed defiance at the bare thought that anyone should venture to whisper such an insult.

'Now don't you take on, miss, people will talk, you know. I don't know how it is, but some folks seem to have nothing to do but go about airing their tongues. It's just their silly idleness, and they do say that Mr. Lydney will be prosecuted about this bank business, but don't you believe it, miss. There ain't no evidence, I tell you, and I can't think myself how folks can go about gabbling of what they don't understand.'

But Mary Lydney waited to hear no more, and with a slight bend of her head she closed the conversation and hurried home. She had never thought of this. Hard times she knew had come upon them, and that a certain amount of disgrace attached itself in her eyes to the closing of the bank she was fain to admit; but that her dear father was liable to be prosecuted was a thing that had never entered her head, and for what? Surely nobody for one moment would venture to insinuate that their misfortune had come upon them from anything but imprudence or ill-luck. She knew that the reason why the robbery of those deeds years ago had been hushed up was to save the honour of a near relation. Her father had strictly cautioned her not to mention this to anyone. And she therefore forgot that the one extenuating circumstance of the case was in all probability unknown to the public. She could not understand it; but still the dreadful fact remained that there were people who believed her father liable to be placed upon his trial for felony.

The more Mary turned this over in her mind the more terrible it appeared to her. Could it be possible that her father knew what men said concerning him? Impossible! Since the bank had stopped payment he had never gone beyond his old-fashioned, spacious garden. But in that she

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was mistaken. Mr. Lydney had known from the minute that exposure became unavoidable the risk that awaited him; he was quite aware that the making away with securities was a matter men were brought to justice for, and further knew that his lame explanation of how these securities had been stolen from him years ago would be hardly deemed valid in the eyes of a jury. He saw no reason to distress his daughter by pointing all this out to her. She was grievously troubled about him now, it would be time enough for her to know this further sorrow when it came. Then it suddenly flashed across Mary that her informant had been Mr. Tootell. What a fool she had been! He was notorious for his garrulity and inaccuracy—it was only some bit of idle gossip he had picked up. She would run out and consult some of her friends on the subject; and then she bethought herself of her father's medical adviser. He had been most kind and considerate during Mr. Lydney's illness, and had called twice or thrice since ruin had come upon them.

Dr. Meadows looked grave as he listened to her eager questioning, and when she had finished said, 'My dear Miss Lydney, now that you have an inkling of the real state of things, it is better you should know the exact truth, more especially as it is possible that you may be of great service to your father upon the occasion. He may or may not be tried, but there can be no doubt that he is liable to be charged with felony. Now, as an old friend, I firmly believe that his explanation, as far it goes, is perfectly true; but he has only told us half his story; I gathered quite enough from him while he was light-headed to know that. I couldn't undertstand him at the time, but from what has since transpired I have been able to put the puzzle together in somewise; persuade him, my dear young lady, to tell the whole story to two old friends—any he may choose—and to be guided by them about making it public. From what I know, and from what I guess, I feel certain in his own interests he should do so.'

'Thank you very much, Dr. Meadows,' replied Mary Lydney. 'I will do my best to persuade him to follow your advice. Do you think that would save him and me this further disgrace?'

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'I can't say, but I think it will do much to strengthen the belief his old friends have in him.'

That very evening Mary commenced her task. She told her father of the terrible rumour that was flying about Exmouth, but he manifested no surprise. 'I have not heard it,' he said, 'because I have not been outside the gates, but I know such a report must be about, and I know, moreover, that it is based upon truth.'

'But, papa, I saw Dr. Meadows to-day, and he will have it that you have only told half your story, and says it would be so much better if you could be induced to tell it all. You know you told me that the reason the robbery was hushed up was to save a near relation.'

'Yes,' replied the banker sternly; 'and you promised me never to open your lips on that subject to a living creature. Have you broken your promise and told that to Meadows?'

'No,' replied Mary; 'I have told it to no one.'

'Then remember I hold you still bound to that promise, and again forbid you ever to speak of what I then told you. I shall do what I consider right, and require no advice from anyone. I am prepared to take the consequences of my own acts, but nobody must ever know the whole story;' and the banker dismissed the subject without further comment.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LADY WRENSLEY'S PHOTOGRAPH

It is a glorious summer night, and the members of the United Flags are sitting about their pretty garden abutting on the coffee-room in various stages of tobacco and exhaustion. Ascot has come and gone once more, and Dicky Chives has followed his fortunes there with the moderate success of last year. Sam Mercer has proved a most profitable friend to him ever since that time that Dicky gave such prompt assistance to the bookmaker at Newmarket. Do not think that Chives was by any manner of means

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making money on the turf, but, thanks to following the judicious hints he gets from Sam Mercer from time to time, he about gets his fun for nothing—that is to say, he wins enough not only to pay his expenses, but to add a little to his banker's account. Sam has taken a great fancy to the young artilleryman, and Sam's advice is good to listen to about most things, but especially about racing. They have, moreover, one bond in common—both are keenly interested in discovering what has become of Sir Frederick Hallaton, although not with quite the same motives. Chives is honestly anxious to hear of the well-being of his old chum, while Sam Mercer is more interested in ascertaining what has become of his sister. However, on this point they can give each other no information. What has become of Fred Hallaton since he left India is a sealed book to them; they have no reason to suppose that he is dead, though he might be even that for all they know to the contrary. Chives—he is Captain Chives now—has had to resign his jacket in the Horse Artillery, and is now stationed at Woolwich. He has ensconced himself in the easiest chair in the garden, has a large regalia in his mouth, a corresponding bucket of something iced to drink at his elbow, and is talking racing dogmatically to two or three men younger than himself, who are sitting with due reverence at the feet of Gamaliel, when a cheery voice exclaims: 'Well, Dicky, you little villain, how are you? I haven't seen you for ages, I was at Ascot too, but I never ran across you.'

'How are you, Thornton?' replied Chives. 'How is the chief and all the old lot? Sit down here and let's have a talk about old times.'

'Oh, bother old times,' replied Thornton laughing; 'I cannot sing the old songs, and all that sort of thing. What's going on up here, for I haven't been in London for a month? What's the new beauty like?'

'New beauty?' rejoined Dicky; 'I'm sure I don't know. I never heard of her. You see, Thornton, society ain't very much in my line. If it had been the new danseuse, the singer of the crack comic song, or even the last phenomenon in ratting circles—well, you'd find me all there, but——'

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'Oh, nonsense, man; you must have heard of Lady Wrensley. Don't you ever go into the Park? They tell me she makes quite a sensation whenever she walks down the Row.'

'The Park?' repeated Dicky. 'Not if I know it! Did you ever see anything in me, Captain Thornton, that could lead you to suppose I should waste my time in any such frivolous manner?'

'Ah!' rejoined the other grinning, 'it would be a pity to defraud the Government and your country in that way, wouldn't it? But, joking apart, Dicky, haven't you seen Lady Wrensley? Why, the fellows at Aldershot say she is the greatest crasher that has been out for years, and has utterly extinguished all the late celebrities in that line.'

'No,' replied Chives; 'I really know nothing about her, old man, but, of course she is in all the shop windows, and I'll take a look at her there to-morrow if I recollect it.' And then the conversation diverged into other channels, as to what was going on at the theatre, mingled with what was going on in London generally, and also what was the regimental news, and whether that distinguished reprobate, Bunker Jones, who for years had hovered on the verge of a court-martial, would be brought to book at last for his latest defiance of the authorities.

When Captain Chives took his walks abroad next day he might have amended Dr. Watts's well known lines by observing, 'How many photographs I see.'

In these days to obtain notoriety, no matter how, is to find your likeness scattered profusely in the shop windows. Whether you have distinguished yourself in a court of law, on the stage, as a professional beauty, or have made your mark at the Bar, in politics, or in medicine, the town is flooded with your photograph; and Chives had no difficulty in discovering one of Lady Wrensley. He certainly had a hazy idea that it was a face he had seen before, and though Sarah's was a face not easy to forget, it must be borne in mind that Chives had only had a glimpse of her upon two occasions—once at the cricket match, and again at the railway station. So that there was not much cause for surprise that he failed in Lady Wrensley to recognise Sarah Mercer.

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Lady Wrensley's success during her second season had turned her head. The two strongest passions of her nature—her vanity and her ambition—were both gratified to an extent she had never dreamt of. Still, she was far too clear-headed not to understand the danger of her position. As Lady Wrensley making her way quietly into society, she had regarded it as perilous enough, but now she had attained notoriety—now that she was the talk of the town and her likeness was in the shop windows, she knew that it was doubly hazardous. She might not be likely to meet anybody who knew her in the fashionable society in which she now moved, but the risk of her picture being recognised was considerable. She knew that photographs that became public property like her own were scattered broadcast all through the country. Nothing more likely than that her photograph was already in the shop windows of Exeter or even in Exmouth. Bitterly she regretted that she had ever yielded to the insidious proposals of the sun artists and consented to sit, but urged by her husband, and carried away by her vanity, she had been unable to resist the temptation of seeing the likeness of the beautiful Lady Wrensley figuring amongst other celebrities. She had overlooked the danger at the moment, and now it was too late to retract. In spite of her natural audacity Sarah would probably have hesitated about trying to force her way into Society could she have foreseen the immense success that she was destined to achieve. Once sail under false colours, and circumstances often compel the impostor to go far beyond his or her original intentions. You have set the machine in motion and are powerless to control it; your fate is out of your own hands, and your own safety requires that you should persevere with the fraudulent *rôle* that you have assumed. Was there not long ago that distinguished 'nobleman' whose unexpected success eventually landed him in one of her Majesty's prisons?

Lady Wrensley, indeed, at times felt very apprehensive of an *exposé*. That her husband might reappear in London, curiously enough, was a thing that troubled her but little. She had so completely made up her mind that he was expatriated for several years that it never occurred to her that any danger was to be dreaded from that source.

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What she did fear was her likeness being recognised by some one of her old Exmouth associates or acquaintances, and, strange to say, the person of whom Sarah lived in greatest fear was no other than Mr. Tootell. During the many years he had lived at Exmouth he had never been known to wander further from it than Exeter, but she knew his insatiable curiosity, and regarded it as quite possible if he once saw her picture that he might come up to London to ascertain if he could whether Sarah Mercer and Lady Wrensley were one and the same person. She had read in the papers, for at that time she was living with her husband, who naturally took the keenest interest in it, of the explosion at the Dragon, and knew that that had been brought about by the curiosity of Tootell He did not like her she knew, and thought that his malice and inquisitiveness might be sufficient incentive to make him undertake such a journey. In short, although flushed and elated with victory, and proud of having stormed not only its outworks, but the very citadel of Society, Lady Wrensley was painfully aware that she was living on the summit of a volcano.

At the corner of Southampton Street, Strand, is one of the largest photograph shops in London. In the window thereof you may see the pictures of everybody who is anybody, whether it is the latest senator who has preached the doctrine that 'though laws were meant for every degree' they never were meant to apply to an M.P., or the last lady who, scorning the tedium and publicity of the Divorce Court, has rid herself of her husband by some one of those resources which chemistry of late has placed so freely at our demand. That the Strand, being so immediately in the vicinity of the Victoria Club, should be much frequented by bookmakers is only in accord with the nature of things; and idly looking in at this window, Sam Mercer —albeit it took a good deal to astonish him—quite started upon gazing at the picture of the last professional beauty, and in Lady Wrensley recognising his own sister. Other people might have doubts and mutter to themselves that it was only a remarkable likeness, but it was scarce likely that a brother should make a mistake about a sister, although he had not seen her for the last three years. Sam

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stared at the photograph for some minutes, and finally walked into the shop and purchased a copy. What did it all mean? How, in Heaven's name, did Sarah become Lady Wrensley? And when, and how, did Sir Frederick Hallaton come by his death? For that Sarah had deliberately committed bigamy was a thing that never occurred to him. He knew nothing of what had become of Sir Frederick, and Captain Chives had told him that he also was equally ignorant upon that point. Still, it was excessively odd that they should have both overlooked all mention of his death in the papers; especially, as he thought it over, did it strike Sam Mercer as curious that Chives should not have heard it from somebody else. How long had Sarah become Lady Wrensley? And now he came to reflect, he remembered that he had seen that lady's name in print very frequently of late. How was he to see her? To see this Lady Wrensley as soon as he could compass it, was the one predominant idea in Sam Mercer's mind. He was not conversant with the haunts of fashion, and though he knew well enough that fashionable London disported itself daily in the Park, still he and his *confrères* did not know its leaders by sight unless they were *habitués* of the racecourse. There were a certain number of great ladies who never missed Ascot, Sandown, or Newmarket, who were not only well known by sight to the fraternity, but even in some few cases personally, but then these were ladies married for the most part to leading patrons of the racecourse, and who made it their pastime. However, after much cogitation Sam Mercer came to the conclusion that to spend a morning or two in the Park would afford him the best chance of seeing Lady Wrensley. He should want no one to point her out to him. He would know Sarah anywhere, and if Lady Wrensley was not her they were at all events as like as two peas. But there was one difficulty about this; it was now the height of the racing season, and Sam Mercer was for the most part away from London on business—indeed, he could scarcely call a morning his own. People can hardly realise what a heavy business that of a bookmaker in large practice is. He is busily engaged on the racecourse nearly the whole day, he has to tot up his accounts in the evening, and when the

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finish of the week comes and he gets back to his own place in London, there is the account to prepare for the big settling on Monday. A man like Sam Mercer has not only to attend at Tattersall's to settle with his bigger customers or their agents, but has also to send off cheques or schedules of their accounts to his numerous country clients, men who speculate from afar, and are only too glad to pay a recognised bookmaker a slight commission on their transactions. A very valuable *clientèle* this; small fish are proverbially sweet, the individual mackerel is of little worth, it is the numbers the seine encloses that make them so well worth catching. And so it came to pass that Sam Mercer never succeeded in catching sight of his sister or her double.

Still, sooner or later, Sam Mercer, now that he had got the clue, was perfectly certain to come face to face with her. She was essentially a London woman, her home was there; and though the seaside and country houses claimed the presence of such a fashionable lady as Sarah had now become from the end of the season till close upon Christmas, yet Lady Wrensley was sure to gravitate back to town in the winter; and during that, to racing men dead season, Sam Mercer had plenty of time on his hands, and, like most of his fraternity, was much given to the theatres and other places of public amusement.

CHAPTER XXIX

SIR FREDERICK'S RETURN

THERE is one advantage in being quartered at Woolwich, it is almost a part of London, and officers are thereby enabled to mix considerably in the gaieties of the season. Aldershot is rather far, but Woolwich is practically as close to Pall Mall as Kensington or Earl's Court. Captain Chives spent a good deal of his spare time in town, and made his appearance at lunch at the United Flags pretty well every other day. Dicky, indeed, was enjoying life after his own fashion. When he wasn't playing cricket at Woolwich during his

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spare time he was watching it at Lord's or at the Oval, and of the great game of England Dicky was an enthusiastic follower. He was sitting at lunch at his club when a page boy slipped up to his table, presented him with a card, and said, 'Gentleman to see you, sir.'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Chives. 'Here, waiter, don't let them take away my lunch, and lay a second plate here at once,' and dashing into the hall, in another moment he was heartily shaking hands with Fred Hallaton.

'Come in, old fellow, have some lunch, and tell me all about yourself. By Jove, how glad I am to see you!'

Hallaton willingly assented, and in a few minutes he and Dicky were seated in the coffee-room exchanging confidences.

'Well, old man,' said the latter, 'you and your affairs two years ago occasioned a good deal of speculation. First of all there was your uncle's death, and then came your retirement from the old corps pretty nearly as soon as you became Sir Frederick. We argued from that he had left you something besides the baronetcy at all events.'

'He left me everything he had,' replied Hallaton laconically. 'No man ever made a greater fool of himself than I did, and no man ever had such an escape of paying the penalty of his folly.'

Dicky made no reply; he was thinking now that Fred had returned to England whether Lady Hallaton would reappear upon the scene. Had she been with him these last two years or so?

'Yes,' continued Fred; 'not only did I come into my uncle's property, but, God forgive me for saying so, I have had another release. I don't wish to breathe a word against her now she is gone, but we never could have lived together, and all feeling of affection for each other was quenched. Lady Hallaton is dead.'

'We never heard what became of her,' replied Chives in a low tone; 'nor did any of us ever see any notice of her death in the papers. Even Sam Mercer at the present moment, I know, is quite unaware of it.'

'It was notified to me in Australia by my solicitors some eighteen months ago. She was living in a quiet country village under an assumed name, but a copy of the

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registry of her death was enclosed in a letter giving all particulars by the local doctor. I only arrived three days ago, but I must run down to Shillingford in a week or two, and see, poor thing, that she has a decent stone to mark her last resting-place. There! don't let's speak any more of it, Dicky. It was a sore time of my life, and a sadder man never sailed for India than me. I little expected to see England again for the next ten years. Now tell me something about the old lot.'

Chives, in reply, rapidly informed him of his own promotion, that the troop to which he had formerly belonged was now stationed at Aldershot, that he had seen Thornton only the other day, with divers other bits of regimental gossip that have no concern with this history.

'And what about all our old friends at and around Exeter?' asked Hallaton. 'The Lydneys, for instance. Is Mary Lydney, Mary Lydney still?'

Chives eyed his companion narrowly for a minute or two before he replied:

'Ah, of course, you couldn't hear of it. Poor old Lydney has come to awful grief. The bank has smashed, and he has been making away with securities or something. I don't understand it exactly, but I believe he was precious near brought to trial for felony. In fact, he's not out of the wood yet. I hear they're still living in the old house, though on a very reduced scale.'

'I am very sorry to hear all this,' said Hallaton at length. 'They were very kind to me when I was at Exeter, and poor Lydney was as hospitable as an Arab. I'm sure his house was not only open to me, but I don't know how many others.'

'Yes, it's a bad business,' replied Chives. 'I suppose now you'll be in town the remainder of the season?'

'Yes; I've been in Australia, New Zealand, and all about those parts so long now that I feel as if I wanted polishing up a bit.'

'Did you do any racing out there?' inquired Chives. 'You used to be pretty keen about it.'

'Yes,' replied Hallaton, 'I'll tell you what, Master Dicky, it would take one of the best we have in England to win out there at one of their swell meetings. They've as good

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cattle, as good courses, and you can back horses quite as heavily out there as you can at home in these days.'

'Then why don't they come over here and win the Derby?' replied Chives curtly.

'Well, there's a little difficulty about the date on which horses take their age compared to ours in this country. I made your identical observation over there, and a bibulous old dunderhead, who pretended to know something about racing, made that rejoinder to me, as if it was insurmountable. I retorted, "Why, damme, if we took it into our heads to win your Melbourne Cup, do you think we wouldn't breed half a dozen on purpose to do it," and that's just what one of the biggest racing men out there is doing now. He's a rich man with lots of money, and is determined to have a cut at our Blue Ribbon. He's breeding now for that very purpose—it will, of course, take a little time—but don't make any mistake, before many years are over you'll see Australia serve up a pretty hot favourite at Epsom. Well, old fellow, I must be going, as you may suppose after this long absence I've a lot to do, and lots of people to see. Come and dine with me at the Thermopylêum at the end of the week. I'll drop you a line to-morrow to say what evening. And now, old man, good-bye for the present.'

When Fred Hallaton found himself once more in Piccadilly he hesitated for a moment, and then strolling across into the Green Park lit a cigar and sat down upon a bench to think. It was a lovely summer day towards the very end of the leafy month. The birds had for the most part launched their families into the world, or at all events voted it too hot to indulge in any 'orchestral business.' The Park was pretty well deserted, the nursemaids and their charges who mostly frequent it had not as yet made their second appearance, so Hallaton had nothing to disturb his reflections, and what did they centre on? The Lydneys, and what had befallen them. Terribly soon after his luckless marriage had Fred Hallaton awoke to the mistake that he had made, that he had snatched at the apple of the Dead Sea when the golden grapes hung ripe for his gathering. He had recognised long ago that though in a moment of infatuation he had run away with Sarah Mercer, yet that Mary had really possessed his heart. No man could have

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been more speedily disenchanted than he was and through the two years of his wanderings the image of sweet Mary Lydney had never been absent from his mind. His admiration for her increased as he contrasted her quiet lady-like manners with the bold self-assertion of the woman whom he had made his wife, and now he was free to choose again, and in a position to ask any woman to marry him. He knew that he had not behaved well to Mary Lydney; he knew that there had been gossip about them in the neighbourhood; then he wondered what the banker would have said to him if he had asked him for his daughter. He had nothing himself to marry on in those days; but then, his uncle, no doubt, if he had approved of the marriage, would have made him an allowance, and at that time who could doubt that Mr. Lydney also would have contributed something to the support of the *ménage*?

Then he thought he should like to see the Lydneys again. He wondered if he went down to Exmouth and called, whether he would be admitted; he had a great mind to try. He could, he thought, easily make up some excuse for being in the neighbourhood, and it would be only proper and right to stand by the banker in his misfortunes, and show, at all events, as far as he was concerned, he had no belief in the rumours of his dishonesty. Yes; he would run down to Exmouth for a few days, as soon as ever he could free himself from these confounded lawyers. If he could but see Mary he would be able to discover if there were any hope of retrieving that mistake that he had made some three years ago. It was possible there might be still a chance for him; he had heard of such things. Men and women whom circumstances had separated at the time, had come together later in life and made a happy marriage of it. At all events he could but try. If he delayed he might chance to be too late and find that another had spoken before him. He was a much graver man than he had been in his Exeter days, and though he had command of money now, and, doubtless, with a very little manœuvring, could have obtained an *entrée* to Society, he felt no disposition to plunge into its delights. No; he would far sooner go down to Exmouth and learn his fate than make merry over the dregs of the season.

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True to his resolution, the following week saw Hallaton installed at the Beacon, no little to the astonishment of Exmouth. He was, of course, well known at the hotel, where he had been present at divers cricketing dinners, &c.; and the little town, as soon as the intelligence oozed out, got quite excited about his arrival. Was Lady Hallaton with him? Much curiosity was evinced upon this point, mingled with no little surprise, that either Sir Frederick or her ladyship should venture to appear in Exmouth. But Hallaton was hardly encountered by any of the people who knew him by sight. On his arrival he had written a note to the banker, begging to be allowed to call the next day, and tell the whole story of his succession to his uncle's property.

Mr. Lydney's first impulse was to decline to see him, but Mary intervened.

'I think you ought to, papa,' she said. 'He means kindly, or he would not have offered to call at all, now that we are down in the world. It will interest you, moreover, to hear all about the last of your old friend, and how he disposed of his property.'

So the banker changed his mind, and wrote a line to say that he should be very pleased to see Sir Frederick at any time it might suit him to call, and in the course of the next afternoon the baronet duly made his appearance. After delicately condoling with Mr. Lydney about his misfortunes, Fred proceeded to narrate the story of his life during the last three years, telling how he had succeeded not only to the baronetcy, but to all his uncle's property; how that he had left the service; and, finally, to the great astonishment of the banker, that he had lost his wife about eighteen months ago. Upon this latter point Mr. Lydney displayed a little anxiety to learn particulars, but Sir Frederick alluded to it in the briefest manner, and let it be understood at once that this was a painful subject, which he declined to discuss further. At the same time he let it be distinctly inferred that his marriage had been far from a happy one.

Still, all this time there was no sign of Mary, and at last Hallaton asked outright whether he was not to have the pleasure of seeing Miss Lydney. Mr. Lydney hesitated

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for a minute or so, and said he was not quite sure whether she was at home. Now it had been a clearly understood thing between the banker and his daughter that Mary should not see Fred Hallaton. Mr. Lydney conceived that she had been very badly treated in the past, and he was very imperative when he consented to receive the baronet himself, it should be on the condition that Mary did not appear; but circumstances alter cases. Sir Frederick Hallaton married was one thing; Sir Frederick unmarried, and having come into a comfortable five thousand a year, was another. Mr. Lydney would have been a fool if he had not at once recognised that it was desirable that Mary and her former admirer should meet once more.

Some few minutes elapsed, and then Mary entered the room. She was by herself, and, moreover, the banker was unaccountably absent until the end of their interview.

'I am glad to see you safe home again,' said the young lady as she shook hands. 'You have, I believe, done with soldiering now.'

But Fred Hallaton had hardly come all the way from London to talk platitudes of this sort. He determined to plunge at once *in medias res*, and replied earnestly, 'Your father has no doubt told you, Miss Lydney, all that has happened to me since I left Devonshire?'

'My father has told me nothing,' said Mary, 'except that you wished to see me. Your uncle's death we of course saw in the papers.'

'I made a terrible mistake then, to which I will not further allude, save to say I lost my poor wife before we had been married a year.'

'I am very sorry for you,' rejoined Mary, in a low tone, though her heart gave an inward jump on learning that Fred Hallaton was a free man again.

'It pleased Heaven to dissolve what was a most unhappy marriage,' said Fred gravely. 'I made a sad mistake. Can you give me some hope, Mary, that it may be yet possible to repair it?'

'I don't know; I won't pretend to misunderstand you—but I also made a mistake at that time, and, Sir Frederick, I'll take very good care not to make another.'

'But, Mary,' he pleaded, 'you wouldn't condemn a man

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who loved you to suffer all his life for a temporary madness?'

'Stop!' she said. 'You can hardly suppose that I am prepared to listen to a love story from your lips as yet. You forget, too, how altered is our position in the world since we last met. Our money is gone—that is nothing; but our very name is tarnished, and that alone would prevent my listening to such words from any man. I will not bring our disgrace into another household.'

'This is nonsense,' he replied; 'you are taking a morbid view of your misfortunes; none of your true friends believe that anything but the ill-luck which may attend anyone caused your father's disaster. As for money, I have plenty. Can you not bid me hope, Mary?'

'I have nothing to add to what I have said,' she replied, rising, as an unmistakable hint that his interview was over. 'Should my father's name be cleared, it might be different in days to come; in the meantime you have no more sincere well-wisher than Mary Lydney;' and she extended her hand to bid him adieu.

Fred Hallaton pressed it passionately, and then disappeared without uttering another word. Upon the whole he was tolerably well satisfied with the result of his visit. He could hardly expect her to yield at the first attack; and as for the stain upon their name, the girl might easily be talked out of that by a man who had taught her to love him. There was no interdict placed upon his visits, and Fred hoped in time to persuade Mary Lydney to forget the past.

CHAPTER XXX

SARAH AT HER ZENITH

NEVER was Lady Wrensley in higher spirits than at the great ball at Dullingham House. All fashionable London was there, and even Sarah's vanity was satisfied with the flattery and admiration that were lavished on her that night. The best men in the room contended for a dance with

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the new beauty; and when Lady Wrensley swept down to supper leaning on the arm of a senator, as distinguished in the drawing-room as he was in the council chamber, a flush of exultation might well mantle her cheek. Having seated her at one of the small supper tables, her companion proceeded to administer to her wants, when suddenly her attention was arrested by the conversation at an adjoining table. 'Ah, yes,' replied the speaker, 'he is the luckiest fellow out. He made a terrible mess of it two or three years ago; married somebody he shouldn't have done, a shop-girl, or barmaid, or something of that sort; his uncle, old Sir Robert Hallaton, made a fresh will, leaving all his property to hospitals, or charities, or something of that kind, and then died before he could sign it, so he came into everything. His place is close by us in Kent, so I know all about it.'

'And how does Lady Hallaton get on in the neighbourhood?'

'We've never seen her. He has been abroad ever since he came into the baronetcy, and I suppose she is with him. However, I hear he was seen in London only a few days ago.'

'Ah, then I dare say you'll make their acquaintance this autumn?' rejoined the lady. 'Nothing more, thanks; now you may take me upstairs again.'

Lady Wrensley was a woman of strong nerve, but she never felt more inclined to scream in her life. She was already fully alive to the dangers of her position, but this was one she had so deliberately thrust on one side that the possibility of its threatening her had all but ceased to trouble her mind. She had so firmly convinced herself that her husband would not return from India for eight or ten years that the report of his reappearance came upon her like a thunder-clap. In eight or ten years so many things might happen. It would be quite time enough, she fancied, to provide for that danger when it occurred. Now, it seemed, he was not only in London, but he had inherited his uncle's title and estates. A change of position with a vengeance. She could never be safe now from meeting him face to face in any such assembly as the present. All this ran through her mind quick as lightning, and so *distrait*

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was she that her companion could not help inquiring if she felt unwell. Lady Wrensley jumped at the excuse, complained that the heat was overpowering, that she had very foolishly danced too much, and if he would be kind enough to take her upstairs she would ask Sir William to see after their carriage.

When she found herself safe in the recesses of her own bedroom, Sarah sat down to consider what she had best do. She had never thought of this. Discovery from many points she had latterly dreaded, but not in this wise. That her husband had become Sir Frederick and a man of means was in itself bewildering. There was but one thing for it, she must leave London at once. She must have time to consider. Bah! she was a fool! She was losing her nerve. These things were easily managed. She must be ill, and then a fashionable doctor, judiciously prompted, could be easily induced to prescribe baths of some sort for her, but at all events abroad. The season was pretty nearly over, and she could do what she liked with Sir William. She would shut herself up for a few days on the score of ill-health, and then send round a few notes and a sheaf of P.P.C. cards, and depart without beat of drum for the Continent.

Another week and Society was thrown into consternation by hearing that the beautiful Lady Wrensley was seriously ill. A few days later and it was buzzed about that Sir Richard Smoothley had pronounced Lady Wrensley's highly nervous organisation completely upset by the excessive gaieties of the last three or four months, and had prescribed perfect rest and the waters of Carlsbad; and by the time that Society had become properly aware of its loss, Sir William and Lady Wrensley had left England on their travels. Their departure was duly announced in the fashionable journals, but made little impression on anyone connected with this history save Sam Mercer. The bookmaker had so far failed to see Lady Wrensley, but for all that, though he could not understand how it should be so, there was a strong conviction in his mind that Lady Wrensley and Sarah were one and the same person.

'Now she has gone abroad,' he muttered, as he threw down the paper. 'Well, unless she went racing, I've not

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much chance of seeing her at present. However, I shall come across her sooner or later and get to know the hang of things whenever I do, you bet;' and with this remark addressed to an imaginary confidant, Sam Mercer quietly betook himself to the study of his ledger, for the bookmaker's accounts were kept as rigidly as those of any respected business firm in the city.

Sanguine about the ultimate success of his love-suit, Fred Hallaton left Exmouth almost as soon as the gossips of the place had realised that he was in their midst, and before they could form the slightest opinion as to what had brought him there. As he made his way up to town by the South-Western he saw by the papers that it was the first day of Stockbridge Races. He had not been on an English racecourse for three years. He had old and pleasant recollections of Stockbridge, one of the few courses in these days where the lawn is not overcrowded, where without any coign of vantage it is possible to step down to the rails or up upon the nearest bench, and see a race run. He resolved to pull up at Andover and enjoy an afternoon's sport. The little meeting on the Danebury Downs was always well attended, and in consequence of its not being overcrowded has this advantage—namely, that you come across pretty well all the acquaintances whom you may have there. Fred Hallaton soon found himself amongst old friends, and was soon enjoying himself as of yore, albeit he displayed more discretion in his proceedings, and bet by no means so boldly as when he was an impecunious soldier. There were plenty of bookmakers to recognise him; these men have good memories for faces, it is part of their vocation, and it was not so very long since Hallaton had been well known to many of them.

He was leaning across the rails which divided the lawn from the betting ring, backing a horse for the Cup, when he was rather taken aback at finding himself addressed by Sam Mercer.

'Glad to see you back, Sir Frederick,' said Sam, slightly touching his hat. 'You are looking well, sir. I've a great favour to ask of you. Would you meet me on the course just outside here after the Cup's run? I won't detain you more than five minutes.'

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For a second Hallaton hesitated, then it struck him that whatever Mercer might have to say to him it had best be got over at once, so he replied, 'All right,' and then turned back to see three of the speediest 'sprinters' in England contest for that trophy. The race over, Hallaton made his way on to the course, where he was speedily joined by the bookmaker.

'I beg your pardon, Sir Frederick,' said Sam, 'and pray don't think I want to intrude. I know my place, and I know yours, but I want you to tell me where my sister is, and whether she is an honest woman?'

'She is dead,' replied Hallaton.

'Sarah dead!' exclaimed the bookmaker, as an almost dazed expression came into his face. 'Would you mind telling me what happened?'

'Your sister became an honest woman,' replied the Baronet, in a constrained tone, 'as soon as I could make her one, and from that hour we led a cat-and-dog life; she found out that I was a poor man, that in marrying her I had quarrelled with my uncle and all other friends who might assist me. There was nothing for it but for me to go to India. We separated by mutual consent in a very short time; she was to draw upon my solicitors for such allowance as I could make her, and in less than a twelve-month information came to them that she had died at a small place in Dorsetshire called Shillingford.'

'I never heard of the place,' remarked the bookmaker. 'I can quite understand you're not getting on with Sarah; she'd a temper of her own, I know. But what could have killed a strong, healthy young woman like her?'

'I haven't been a fortnight in England yet, and therefore have not had time to see the doctor who attended her; but I have the letter he wrote at the time, in which he gives rapid consumption as the cause.'

'What, Sarah consumptive! Impossible! I beg your pardon, Sir Frederick, but I can hardly believe that.'

'I have told you all I know,' replied Hallaton coldly.

'Thank you, sir,' replied the bookmaker, and touching his hat he walked away without another word.

It was not often Sam Mercer neglected business on the racecourse, but he allowed the next two races to be run

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without opening his book. The whole thing was such a puzzle that he did not know what to think; but that a girl of five-and-twenty, in the best of health and spirits when he last saw her—and he knew that she was in the like state when she ran away—should have died of consumption before the year was out, was most improbable. Dead, of course, she might be; but he could not believe that that was the manner of her death. And if it was not, what had induced that doctor to declare it was? Then there was the photograph of this Lady Wrensley, who was her very double. What did it all mean? Had there been foul play? Or was Sarah dead at all? He must see this Lady Wrensley.

The reappearance of Sir Frederick Hallaton, and the story he had told of his wife's death, was, if true, an explanation of Sarah's silence which had never entered Sam Mercer's wildest calculation.

'Shillingford,' he muttered, and then wrote the name down at the end of his betting-book. 'I'll not forget that, and as soon as I've a spare week I'll run down there and just make a few inquiries on the spot.'

Hallaton, too, was not a little disconcerted at the way Sam Mercer had taken the intelligence of his sister's death. It had never occurred to Sir Frederick for one moment to doubt the information he had received concerning it; but he had seen disbelief in every line of the bookmaker's face. And his final observation most certainly expressed the same. It would be a terrible thing for him to discover, after making that journey down to Exmouth, that he was under a misapprehension all the time—that he had a wife alive, and was no longer free. Pooh! it was all nonsense. Sam Mercer was incredulous because he would have gloried in seeing his sister Lady Hallaton.

The bookmaker had visions very likely of him, Sir Frederick, going on the turf, and perhaps hoped to pull the strings of a prosperous racing establishment. Was it likely that any medical man could be induced to write an account of the last illness of a person still alive? No; the bookmaker's scepticism was simply the outcome of his desire. He was loth to think that his sister had passed away, more especially now that he knew she had been Lady Hallaton.

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Still, for all that, the Baronet had been made sufficiently uneasy to decide that that journey down to Shillingford should no longer be delayed. What was it, a matter of two or three days at the outside? He had but to look at the registry of death kept in the church vestry, have an hour's conversation at the outside with Dr. Burdett, and there was no more to be done. Still, perhaps it would be as well just to have a few minutes' talk with Mr. Kirk before he started.

On his arrival in town he lost no time in seeking an interview with that gentleman and explaining his intention. The solicitor listened attentively to what he had to say, and then replied—

'It has never occurred to me, Sir Frederick, to doubt Lady Hallaton's death, so far. You see, to begin upon, it was the resigning of a fixed income, and in my experience frauds are committed to obtain money, not to lose it; besides, it is difficult to suppose that Lady Hallaton did not know, at all events, that you had succeeded to the title. and a handle to her name is a thing that all women value. That you had succeeded to Sir Robert's property it was quite likely she would not be aware of, but even that a clever woman, as you describe her ladyship to have been, would have been sure to inquire into. No, Sir Frederick, I make little doubt but what she is dead; but of course there is one weak link in the case, so far as we know about it, and that is the identity of Mrs. Melrose with Lady Hallaton. Still that, no doubt, Dr. Burdett can clear up, and you're quite right, the sooner you go down and see him the better.'

Fortified with this advice, Sir Frederick determined to run down to Shillingford without delay.

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CHAPTER XXXI

TOOTELL AND TABLE-TURNING

IT MAY be easily supposed that the appearance of Sir Frederick Hallaton in Exmouth was a source of great excitement to Mr. Tootell. The baronet, indeed, had arrived and departed before he even heard of his coming. 'Now, what could have brought him down here?' was the question Mr. Tootell was constantly propounding to his intimates. 'We all know what used to bring him so much to Exmouth before he was a baronet, and a pretty muddle he made of it, going off with that hussey Sarah Mercer, and mixing himself up with her precious father, old Joe. I wouldn't say it, because I am always careful not to talk about things I am not sure of, but, anyway, he was precious lucky not to be charged with having a share in that little business of old Joe's. Still, if there was a place I should have thought Sir Frederick would have kept out of, it would be this. I know, if my father-in-law had been convicted of felony, I shouldn't care about visiting the place where he committed it.'

'But old Mercer wasn't convicted of felony,' retorted Mr. Abrams, the furniture broker, who happened just then to be the recipient of Mr. Tootell's garrulity.

'No, he wasn't,' snapped that worthy, 'because they couldn't catch him; but he ought to have been.'

'You are always very bitter against your old friend,' said Mr. Abrams. 'It's all because they tied you up and made you a prisoner for twenty-four hours.'

'I wish they had tied *you* up, and then you'd have seen how *you* liked it.'

'Well, don't you see they was obliged to do it for their own sakes? They know'd you was a conscientious and law-abiding citizen, because that's about what you are, Mr. Tootell. Why, it would have been your duty to lay an information against them, and in course they knowed you'd have done your duty.' And the broker's eyes twinkled as he said so.

'It's rather hard a man should have to go through so

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much in the performance of his duty,' grumbled the other. He had always regarded himself as a martyr on behalf of the public upon that occasion.

'Now,' continued the crafty dealer, 'if I had been the hero of an affair like that, blessed if I shouldn't like some little memento of the affair. Now, here you are the *busiest* idle man in all Exmouth, and right you are. When a man has made his money, why shouldn't he sit down and enjoy it? But you've an active mind, Mr. Tootell: you can't help taking part in all that's going on. To sit down and do nothing might do for some men, but it don't do for you. A man like you has heaps of letters to write.'

'Eh?' said Tootell, who was conscious that his correspondence was very limited, but who all the same rather liked the idea of being supposed to be still actively mixed up in all the business of the town.

'Now I've got the very thing for you,' continued Mr. Abrams; 'a little memorial of the old Dragon Inn—you were at the sale there, and recollect the way Mr. Lydney bid for tables.'

'Ah! Now what made him do that?'

'I'm smothered if I know,' rejoined the broker; 'he was going off his chump I expect, but I thought he knew something, and so I bid against him for some of the better ones; but he would have them all except one, which he overlooked and which was sold after he had left. I got that.'

'Yes, well, and what became of it?' inquired Tootell, now much interested.

'Just what I expected. Mr. Lydney came round the next morning and gave me something handsome for my bargain. When the banker was so ill Miss Lydney got rid of most of the tables, and I've bought this pair which came out of the old ball-room. Now you ought to have one of 'em or both, Mr. Tootell. They'd look well in your rooms, nice remembrance of the old inn and the service you did your Queen and country.'

The old gossip was tickled, he pulled up his shirt collar with the air of a man 'who had done the State some service and who knew it.' Something from the Dragon would be nice in his rooms, it would be an excuse for telling the whole story over and over again. He had visions of pointing

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to it, and remarking, 'Curious old table that, now I'll tell you how I came by it,' etc. He asked the price. From that moment it was all over with him, the broker continued to tickle him like a trout, and after ten minutes or so of chaffering he became the owner of one of the tables.

When Mr. Tootell got his new table home the first thing he did was to examine it carefully, and for the time he was so interested in this new problem as to what had induced Mr. Lydney to buy all these tables that he actually forgot to think any further of what had brought Sir Frederick to Exmouth. He looked into the drawers and discovered no more than the banker and the broker had done before him. At last it occurred to him to pull the drawers, of which there were two, right out, and he discovered at their back a long lid which ran the whole length of the table, and which, when he tapped it with his finger, he felt sure concealed some further compartment behind it. He was wound up to the highest state of excitement, and getting his walking-stick speedily discovered by measurement that the drawers did not go to the back of the table by at least four inches, and further, upon turning the table upside down, ascertained that this concealed compartment must be an inch or two deeper than the drawers. How did this compartment open; and who could say what it might contain? Mr. Lydney might have had method in his madness, and guessed that these old tables had secret drawers and compartments that might be well worth overhauling. That Mr. Lydney's eccentric purchase at the Dragon sale had been but the precursor of his coming illness and consequent light-headedness had been the accepted opinion of all Exmouth, and it had never occurred to anyone, much less Mr. Tootell, when the bank stopped payment and the tale of those missing securities was published to the world, to connect the two stories.

That gentleman spent some days in the investigation of his new purchase. It was easy to have broken open the compartment even with the poker, but that was not in the least in accordance with the temperament of Mr. Tootell; he would have scorned that solution of his puzzle with as much contempt as the enthusiast concerning double acrostics does being told the words, and at length he one evening

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stumbled on the key to the problem. He had for some time given up feeling for the secret spring inside. The table was made of dark and beautifully polished walnut-wood. Its top was covered with stamped leather, the margin of which was inlaid with a curious pattern of brasswork, which here and there rose in slight bosses, or knobs. Poring over this for considerably more than the hundredth time, he was suddenly struck by discovering that at the right-hand upper corner of the table there was a slight variation in the pattern of the brass inlaying, so slight, indeed, as to be imperceptible to the casual observer, and close investigation showed him that the stud in this portion was rather larger than its fellows. Mr. Tootell felt like Columbus when at the end of his adventurous voyage he first sighted the land, or as Xenophon might have felt after his famous retreat when his followers from the Steppes of the Crimea first looked down upon the waters of the Euxine and shouted in tones of exultation, 'The Sea! the sea!' Rapidly he drew out both drawers, pressed the raised knob, the back of the compartment fell down and disclosed an opening at the back, running the length of the table between four inches wide and the same in depth. Eagerly did Mr. Tootell thrust in his hand, but the compartment was perfectly empty. Nothing rewarded his patience and ingenuity. That he was deeply disappointed at the result of his triumph it would be useless to deny, but when it came to the unravelling of a mystery Mr. Tootell was as unwearied as the traditional spider of the Scottish King. If this compartment existed in the one table it probably did in its fellow. He would go down to Abrams' to-morrow, tell him he found he could do with the pair, and that he might send him the other one home. Always an early riser, he was at the broker's in good time the next morning, and told Mr. Abrams his intention, but to his dismay the broker replied—

'I am sorry, Mr. Tootell, but that's where it is, and that's where we in business have the pull of you. You don't know a bargain when you see it. I wanted you, now, to have them pair of tables, but, bless you, now it's too late. There was a gent came along only three days ago, and began looking over my goods. "What do you want for that table?" says he. I puts it to him same figure as I

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does to you. "I'll take it," says he, "here's the money. I'll write down my address, and you send it off to me by the next goods train." And that's how it stands, Mr. Tootell, the table is gone.'

'But you know where he lives?' said Tootell incautiously.

'Well, of course, I've got his address on my books,' said Mr. Abrams, 'and if you like, I can write and see about it.'

'Well, you may say, Abrams, I've taken a fancy to have the pair, and don't mind giving him a trifle for his bargain.'

Mr. Tootell was again no match for the cunning broker. The table had never left his shop, but he had read an eagerness to purchase it in his customer's face that told him he would be quite safe in advancing his terms. Day after day did Mr. Tootell look in at Mr. Abrams' shop to ask if he had got the table back. But the wily broker declared he had not received an answer from the buyer of the article. At last, Tootell threatened to write himself, and this brought Mr. Abrams to the point.

'Fact is, sir,' he said, 'you'll have to make a bid, and if you'll take my advice, it'll be a tolerably bold advance on what you gave for the other. Say, two pound, now.'

'Two pound!' exclaimed Tootell. 'Ridiculous! Why, it's about a third as much again as I gave for the other.'

'Well,' replied Mr. Abrams, with a shrug of his shoulders, 'it must be as you like, but if I fancied that article of furniture, I shouldn't stick at a few shillings.'

Tootell shook his head, and left the shop without another word; but he returned in half an hour, and, looking in, said, 'All right, Abrams, I'll do it; but mind, I'll not rise another shilling, that's my final bid, and he may take it or leave it.'

'All right, sir, I'll wager I've an answer one way or the other by return of post.' And two days afterwards Mr. Tootell was informed that the table was his for the price stipulated, *plus* its carriage from London. So, upon the whole, the crafty Mr. Abrams made rather a good thing of the little transaction. Still he shook his head over it, with a dim misgiving that he had, after all, got the worst of the deal. He considered himself a pretty good judge of the value of furniture, but it might be that these quaintly inlaid

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old writing tables were worth considerably more than he thought. 'The deuce is in the tables,' he muttered. 'Strikes me that Mr. Lydney understood more about them than I thought he did.'

When he had got his prize home, Tootell sat down to study it with feverish impatience. He knew the secret now, and so it took him little time to discover that the irregularity of the brass pattern that he had noticed in the other table did not exist in this. He examined the pattern carefully, but the slightly enlarged boss was nowhere to be found. He pulled out the drawers, and tapped with his finger on the back of the table, but he felt pretty sure there was no cavity, and measurement speedily confirmed him in that belief. He turned the table upside down, and it was quite evident that no secret drawer or compartment existed in this one. It was very curious. The tables were distinctly a pair, and the only reason he could imagine for the secret compartment being placed in one of them only was to make the search for it still more puzzling for anyone who had obtained an imperfect clue to it.

Suddenly an idea struck him; he rose from his chair and walking across to a chest of drawers opened one, and, after rummaging for two or three minutes amongst some papers it contained, brought forth a marked catalogue of the sale at the Dragon. He was a constant attendant at sales, not as a buyer, but from mere idle curiosity, and was wont at times to mark off any exceptional price given for anything. This recalled to his memory that the banker had bought the three tables in the ball-room, while the fourth, although he had not marked it, was of course the one bought by the broker, and sold by him afterwards to the banker. He wondered where that other pair of tables were now. Had Mr. Lydney kept them? Not that he felt any further inclination to speculate in them himself, but he *would* like to know where they were.

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CHAPTER XXXII

SIR FREDERICK VISITS SHILLINGFORD

THE news that Lady Hallaton was dead was not long in finding its way about Exmouth. Although Mary never opened her lips on the subject, her father had no such reticence. Sir Frederick had never hinted that he wished his loss kept a secret; indeed, why should he? He had behaved with perfect propriety in alluding to his wife's death, but he scarcely disguised that it was a relief to find that it had pleased Providence to annul his mistaken marriage. Mr. Lydney mentioned it to one or two intimate friends, and then, in accordance with natural laws, the news gradually filtered through the town and neighbourhood. Fred Hallaton became once more the subject of much speculation, and it transpired, of course, that the banker's authority for his statement was Sir Frederick himself. The Lydneys, apparently, were the only people who had seen him during his brief stay at Exmouth. What did that mean? His former flirtation with Mary was at once remembered. Could it be possible that, in accordance with the French proverb, he had returned to his first love? And was Mary Lydney destined after all to become Lady Hallaton? And then, sad to say, there were rancorous old ladies—ah! and, for the matter of that, spiteful young ones too—who tittered and said Sir Frederick was singular in his tastes, and seemed to have a *penchant* for the daughters of fraudulent fathers.

Lady Wrensley, once safely established on the other side of the Channel, coolly reviewed her position, and the more she thought it over the more convinced she became of how very precarious it was. The one thing she had never counted upon had come to pass. Her husband had returned to England a wealthy man. She had taught herself to look upon it that there were only three men ever likely to recognise Lady Wrensley as Sarah Mercer, and these were her husband, Mr. Tootell, and Sam. The first she thought

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it improbable she should ever come across, the second she considered could be evaded or at the worst completely browbeaten. As for her brother, the one risk she ran was being seen by him on a racecourse; and though she cared nothing about that pastime herself, yet that there were certain functions, such as Sandown, Ascot, Goodwood, &c., at which it behoved fashionable ladies like herself to appear, she was aware. Still, if it came to the worst, surely she could rely upon her brother to hold his tongue. They had always been good friends, and let his opinion be what it might it was not likely that he would wish to bring her to open shame; but Sir Frederick; well, she would be liable now to meet him anywhere, at any moment. However, she was safe for the present, and had plenty of time to consider what course she should pursue. She could not bear the idea of giving up London, and, what is more, great as her influence was over Sir William, she almost doubted, persuading him to give up his house, his club, and the society of his old friends for a life on the Continent, which he did not scruple to conceal bored him excessively. She could not see her way at all. After reaching the summit of her ambition, she could not disguise from herself that she was in imminent peril of being cast down into the mire. One thing only was clear to her just now, that she must find somebody who would keep her accurately informed of the movements of Sir Frederick Hallaton.

Had she discovered that somebody at present, his report would hardly have raised her spirits. Sir Frederick was speeding down the South-Western line bound for Shillingford. He found it to be little more than a large village, but apparently a well-to-do place. There were plenty of snug cottages with pretty gardens attached to them, inhabited probably by well-to-do people of the middle class. He put up at the principal hostelry, a good old-fashioned country inn, and the next morning commenced his inquiries. He first made his way to the church, and from an adjoining cottage succeeded in hunting out the sexton. That worthy, in reply to Hallaton's inquiries, said, 'Yes, he remembered burying Mrs. Melrose. He could show the gentleman her grave if he wished to see it;' and, without more ado, he led the way to it across the quiet churchyard, and, pointing to

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one of the green mounds therein, said that Mrs. Melrose lay beneath, and, in corroboration, pointed to a plain headstone on which was briefly inscribed, 'Sacred to the memory of Susan Melrose, who departed this life June 19, 1887.' No word to indicate her age, or to give the slightest clue as to who Susan Melrose might have been. Did he recollect the lady in her lifetime? Yes, she had come to the village ailing the winter before, and she seemed to get worse and worse all the spring time, and though on fine days she used to get out in a bath chair, yet gradually she had to give that up, and finally in June she died. Yes, he could get the registers, they were kept in the vestry, and there Sir Frederick saw the official entry in which it was quite clear that Susan Melrose had died upon the date in question, and he had little doubt that the sexton's story of the last few months of her life was correct in the main. When asked if Dr. Burdett attended her, he replied, 'Maybe, I don't rightly know; we have two or three doctors here.' However, there could be no difficulty in discovering the residence of Dr. Burdett, who no doubt could establish the identity of Sarah with Mrs. Melrose. He was soon directed to Dr. Burdett, who lived in one of the prettiest of the cottages before mentioned, standing rather high, and commanding a glorious moorland view. The doctor, a hale, hearty man, verging on sixty, offered in his own person a splendid testimony to the salubrity of Shillingford.

'Ah, yes,' he said, when Hallaton told him that he had called to inquire concerning the last illness of Mrs. Melrose. 'I attended her during the few months she lingered; sad case, my dear sir. I knew she was doomed the minute I saw her; there was nothing to be done but to smooth her passage to the grave, poor thing; she knew that she was dying, and seemed quite willing to go. She was in the last stage of consumption, and I gathered that her life had not been altogether a happy one.'

'She confided her real name to you?' said Hallaton.

'She never made any mystery about her name. She was known all through the village as Mrs. Melrose, though there were not many people who knew her personally. She was not always well enough to see people. As she

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once said sadly to me, "It's too late now to make new friends, doctor."'

Hallaton started. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'you perhaps don't think yourself justified in betraying her confidence to a stranger. I have strong grounds for inquiring into Mrs. Melrose's death. I presume, sir, you wrote this letter?'

The doctor took it, ran his eye over it, and then remarked drily, 'Not one word of it.'

'And you did not forward this certified copy of Susan Melrose's death to Messrs. Kirk and Co.?'

'Certainly not. I never even heard of Messrs. Kirk and Co., nor had I any knowledge of Mrs. Melrose's friends. She was accompanied down here by a middle-aged woman, who, I should say, was an old and confidential servant—might have been her nurse. Anyway, after her mistress's death she made all arrangements for the funeral, satisfied what claims there were against her in the place, and then left Shillingford. I've never heard of her since. Whether anyone else has I can't say.'

Hallaton was simply dumbfounded. The identity of Mrs. Melrose with Sarah would probably be harder to prove than he had anticipated. He had not yet grasped the fact that they were different women.

'Stop, Dr. Burdett,' he exclaimed. 'Would you be kind enough to describe Mrs. Melrose?'

'She was a fair, slight, pretty little woman, about thirty——'

It flashed across him now that the woman who lay buried in the churchyard below there was not his wife. What object Sarah could have had in thus deceiving him he could not conceive.

'That is not the description you expected?' said the doctor.'

'No,' replied the other. 'The Mrs. Hallaton whom that letter led me to suppose had died here under the assumed name of Melrose was a tall, dark, handsome young woman, and her death by consumption was the very last thing that any of her friends expected.'

'That most certainly was not my patient, then,' said the doctor. 'I should think she was a fragile, delicate, little thing from the first. Just one of those women who, if they

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find the world go too hard with them, are sure to fret, give in, and drop into a consumption from want of stamina to fight the battle of life with.'

'Thank you, Dr. Burdett,' said Hallaton rising. 'I'll take up no more of your time at present. It may be that I shall have to ask you to put the story of your attendance on Mrs. Melrose and her death on paper some day, but you shall not be troubled unless it is unavoidable,' and with that Sir Frederick shook hands, and then left the house.

Audacious as Sarah's scheme had been, it had yet the possibility of success. Had her husband remained as she anticipated ten or twelve years in India, Dr. Burdett, healthy man as he looked, might have been in his grave, at all events he would have been close upon seventy years of age, and at that time of life, although the memory may be as vigorous as ever concerning the events of early days and those of maturity, it is apt to wax weak and uncertain regarding those of latter years. Even if alive, the doctor's recollection of Mrs. Melrose might have been but hazy. It was the unexpected turn of events that had upset all Sarah's calculations.

When Fred Hallaton had recovered himself sufficiently to collect his thoughts, he was first of all struck with dismay at the position in which he had placed himself. He honestly loved Mary Lydney, and deemed he had good hopes of winning her for his bride. He remembered ruefully that he had not behaved fairly to her before. What would she think of him now, when he had to tell her that, despite all he had said, he found that he was not free to wed again? He winced as he thought of the look of contempt that would come across Mary's pretty face. To have brought a proud girl like this to half own her love for him a second time before making quite sure that he was free to solicit it—it would be an offence past all forgiveness. Oh, why had he been such a fool as not to run down to Shillingford before he paid that visit to Exmouth? Could it be true that Sarah was still alive? And yet, what other inference could he draw? It was clear that the tale of her having died of consumption under the name of Melrose was all moonshine, and, if so, what likelihood was there of a young woman with her magnificent physique

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being thus prematurely cut off? Sam Mercer was right that the cause of her death should have been consumption ought to have made anyone who knew her sceptical. It might impose upon Mr. Kirk, but he ought to have felt incredulous the minute he was made aware of what was supposed to have carried her off. No. Sarah must be still alive. Though what her object could be in wishing him to believe her dead was a mystery beyond his comprehension. 'Still,' he thought, 'she must have lived here for a bit in '87. It is scarcely likely that it would have occurred to her to personate Mrs. Melrose, unless she had been almost a witness of her untimely end. Stupid of me, I ought to have asked Burdett if he knew anything of a Mrs. Hallaton. However, no doubt he would have mentioned it if he had. Still, it will be as well to make inquiries before I leave.'

Now, this is just what the doctor would have done, had Sir Frederick been a little more open with him; but he had never thought proper to state what object he had in making these inquiries. Dr. Burdett was a cautious man, and though he had honestly told Fred all he knew about Mrs. Melrose, did not think it necessary to mention that the handsome Mrs. Hallaton, who had scraped some slight acquaintance with Mrs. Melrose, and occasionally walked beside her chair, answered to his description. Sir Frederick, however, after due questioning with the landlord of his inn, and some of the tradespeople, quite convinced himself that Sarah had been on and off at Shillingford during the spring and summer of '87. They all recognised the description of Sarah, but were dubious about the name. However, reference to the post-office at last settled that point. Looking back at their books, they were able to pronounce positively that four registered letters had been received there by Mrs. Hallaton during the time mentioned.

Sir Frederick travelled back to London, with the terrible conviction that the cup of happiness was dashed from his lips, and that he was not the free man he had thought himself.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

YOUR SISTER IS ALIVE

THE more Sir Frederick reflects on the cruel deception that has been practised on him, the more furious he feels with the woman who had thus deceived him. His marriage had been a fatal error; he and Sarah had parted, and he had been quite prepared to make the best of things, but the rumour she had thought fit to circulate of her death had led him into a dreadful mistake. What was he to do? What would Mary think of him? Had he better write to her at once, or had he better wait till he had ascertained beyond all doubt that his wife was alive? Nonsense; he knew that now. Where she was and what she was doing might take him some time to find out, but that she was living he was quite convinced. Clearly, the best thing he could do was to tell the whole story to Mr. Kirk. This he proceeded to do forthwith, not disguising the fact that, believing Lady Hallaton to be dead, he was half engaged to another young lady.

The lawyer listened attentively. He had heard too many strange stories in his time to feel much surprised at anything.

'I quite agree with you,' he said at length, 'and have no doubt that Lady Hallaton is alive. She must have had some strong motive for putting into practice so clumsy a device for effacing herself. The whole fiction was bound to collapse whenever anybody went down to Shillingford and made a few inquiries. I should advise your endeavouring to trace Lady Hallaton at once. The necessary inquiries you will naturally wish conducted with secrecy?'

Sir Frederick nodded. 'Do you think you'll succeed?' he asked.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. 'I can offer no opinion. The agent whom I shall at once send down to Shillingford will perhaps discover some clue which escaped you in your hasty visit. I will write to you as soon as I have anything to tell you.'

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'Then there is no more to be said,' rejoined the baronet, and, having shaken hands with Mr. Kirk, he took his departure.

'Ahem!' mused the lawyer, when he found himself alone. 'I can see only one motive for her ladyship's conduct, and that is she must have fallen in love with somebody else, and so wished to do away with her past. She was a handsome woman by all accounts, and the allowance he paid her was but moderate, while, from Sir Frederick's account, they were heartily tired of each other. I should think if Sir Frederick can trace her he would find himself a free man.'

July is drawing to a close, but Hallaton still lingered in town. He had meant as soon as August came in to run down to Exmouth for a few days, or it might be a few weeks, if Mary Lydney gave him encouragement to prolong his visit. Now he did not know what to do. He had not yet been able to steel himself into writing that letter to Mary. He soothed himself with the idea that he had best wait till he could speak more definitely; that if that letter had to be penned it should be after he had heard from Mr. Kirk. He was in a state of feverish unrest consequent on what he was pleased to term the uncertainty of his position—we desire some one thing, and though our sober judgment tells us that there is no probability of its happening, yet there still lingers in our breasts a hope that our desire may be fulfilled. Hallaton's reason told him that his wife was still alive, and he was not blind to the fact that her discovery might entail shame upon his name. August came, and still no news from the lawyer. He went down and saw Mr. Kirk. That gentleman said he had no definite news yet, but their agent was following up a clue which he thought might lead to something tangible.

Hallaton's mind was made up. Town was getting hot and stuffy. There was no use staying there any longer. He could not go down to Exmouth as matters now stood; he would go North, and see what York and Doncaster might do for him. He was dearly fond of racing, and those were two of the pleasantest meetings in England.

What memories do not the two great battlefields of the North call up to the genuine racing man! I am talking

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of the real lover of the sport, who not only bears in mind all that he has seen himself, but who is versed in all the famous traditions of the past; who, though it was not his luck to see it, knows all about the famous match on the Knavesmire, when, to the dismay of Yorkshire, the 'spots' went down before the tartan jacket of Eglinton's chivalric Earl; and who can picture to himself how the Tykes stood aghast as Voltigeur was collared by the famous Irish outsider on the Town Moor.

Hallaton has arrived at York, and taken up his quarters at the Station Hotel for a week. He has a good many acquaintances there amongst the soldiers, and is altogether having as pleasant a time as a man so harassed as himself can expect to do. It is the last day of the meeting. As far as his speculations have gone he has not been very successful, but he is not much disturbed in that respect, when a little to his surprise he stumbles across Chives. That gentleman, indeed, as far as the military authorities permit, now rarely misses an important race meeting. As has been said before, he is fond of racing, and what with his own observation and an occasional very useful hint from Sam Mercer, he contrives to make his amusement self-supporting.

'Well, old man,' exclaimed Dicky, 'I am very glad to see you twirling the tambourine once more. There ain't nothing like it, you know, in these hot summer days; and Newmarket Heath just braces you up for the coming winter.'

'Ah, and leaves you at times like the bears, to live upon sucking your paws till next spring,' rejoined Hallaton, laughing. 'Sugar-cane, to wit. But I should like to know how the deuce you manage with the powers that be to get leave for all your little outings?'

'Don't touch upon a sore subject,' returned Chives; 'they are not bad as a rule, but they are playing it rather low upon a poor orphan just now.'

'What do you mean?' said Hallaton.

'Mean, sir?' replied Chives bombastically: 'this, that a tyrannical colonel, when he granted me three days to come here, grimly remarked that mine seemed to be the sickliest family he had ever heard of, and that for the next two or three months any of my relations who might be

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afflicted with ill-health would have to endure it without the consolation of my presence. Now, where does a man like that expect to go to?'

'You'll have to make hay while the sun shines, Dicky,' replied Hallaton, laughing. 'No chance to recover at Doncaster what you lose on the Knavesmire.'

'Ah, the more necessary it is that I attend closely to business now,' rejoined Chives laughingly, and without further parley he plunged into the ring. 'Halloa, Mercer!' he exclaimed, as he suddenly encountered the bookmaker busily engaged in the exercise of his calling. 'What are you doing about this race?'

'You mean what do I think about this race, Captain Chives,' rejoined Sam, smiling; 'well, they are laying six to four on Haddington, and of course I'm fielding, but I should think he'll win easily. Better leave it alone, sir.'

Dicky followed Mercer's advice, but the bookmaker proved at fault in his predictions, for a hundred yards from home the roar of the ring proclaimed that the favourite was beaten, and that another of those supposed 'good things' had brought the army of backers to woe.

It so happened that Chives and Sam Mercer had not met since Ascot; during all July Chives had fallen a victim to one of those long courses of instruction which, though no doubt tending to the improvement of the officer's military science, interferes sadly with his private amusements, and, therefore, Dicky had not been visible on a racecourse since the Royal Meeting. Suddenly it occurred to Chives to wonder whether Mercer and Hallaton had met since the latter's return; it was a question he had not liked to put to Sir Frederick, but he had no such scruples with regard to Sam. As soon as the tumult over the unexpected result of the Great Yorkshire Stakes had subsided, he sought out the bookmaker, and, taking advantage of the lull, asked him the question.

'Yes,' replied Sam, 'I saw him at Stockbridge, and asked him to give me five minutes' conversation. Well, Captain Chives, I don't want to intrude upon him. I know I'm not his form, and all that sort of thing; but, damme, one has one's feelings. A man may be fond of his only sister, I suppose, and he married mine.'

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'Come, Mercer, I don't quite see as yet what you've got to complain of.'

'I suppose I've not,' replied Sam bitterly. 'I only wanted to know if the girl was well; and if he could have said she was happy besides, I should have been more than satisfied.'

'Well and happy!' exclaimed Chives; 'why, surely Hallaton told you what had happened?'

'Yes, he told me she was dead. He told me that she died of consumption almost within a year of my last seeing her. I don't believe a word of it, and there are times when I don't think he does either.'

'You are all wrong there. I am sure,' replied Chives, 'that Hallaton is firmly convinced of your sister's death.'

'And I am quite as sure she is alive,' rejoined Mercer, 'and I'll come at the truth, too, before the year's out.'

With a slight shrug of his shoulders Chives walked away. The puzzle was quite beyond him. He knew both men well, and was aware that the bookmaker was quite as straightforward as the baronet. Both were evidently firm in their convictions, and both, no doubt, thoroughly honest in their belief. Dicky felt that for the future he had best refrain from inquiries.

The day wears on, and good though the sport has been, it was unusually fertile in surprises; and as Captain Chives and Fred Hallaton drive back to York, they are bound to confess that the meeting has been more pleasant than profitable.

'Quite sure you won't stay and dine, Dicky?' asked Fred, as they pulled up at the station. 'Sure to be no difficulty about a room at the hotel to-night.'

'No: the difficulty will be with the bigwigs at Woolwich to-morrow morning,' rejoined Chives. 'Can't be done, old man. Come and see me off, won't you?'

Thus adjured, Hallaton accompanied his chum into the station. The platform was crowded; it was the 'special' for town at the conclusion of the races, and, needless to say, the sporting contingent of all grades mustered numerously. As they paced up and down the platform, exchanging recognitions with various acquaintance, they passed Sam Mercer, engaged in earnest confabulation with one of

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his brethren. He gave a slight glance, and half touched his hat in acknowledgment of Chives, but took no notice whatever of Hallaton.

'Good Heavens!' exclaimed the latter, 'that was Mercer, wasn't it? I must speak to him. I haven't seen him since Stockbridge.'

'Odd you haven't come across him,' replied Dicky. 'Can't have been in the ring much, or you must have done it, because he has been there all the meeting.'

'Just so, I wasn't,' replied the baronet. 'Such betting as I did I entrusted to Watgrove.'

'That's where it is,' replied Dicky, in an aggrieved tone. 'You blessed swells who are wallowing in wealth leave these things to your commissioners, whereas we poor beggars have to struggle and perspire and fight for half a point of odds, and when you are only my inches it's pretty tough work, mind you, and only to find that all is barrenness, and that nothing is so illusory as the pursuit of riches.'

'Shut up, Dicky!' replied Fred sharply. 'I must speak with Mercer.'

Chives said nothing, but he thought to himself, 'If any good can come of that interview I'll simply give it all up.'

However, Hallaton's mind was quite made up. He strode down the platform, and tapping the bookmaker on the shoulder, quietly said:

'I must have a word with you.' Sam Mercer turned with no little astonishment, and courteously raising his hat, he replied:

'Certainly, Sir Frederick; I'm at your disposal till the train starts.'

'Two minutes will more than suffice for what I have got to say,' was the reply. 'I told you at Stockbridge that my wife, your sister, was dead, and I believed it to be true at the time. I was deceived. She is not, but where she is, and what has become of her, I have not the remotest idea. Why she thought proper as far as she could contrive to give me legal information of her decease I have no idea. She and I will probably never meet again, but whenever I ascertain her address it will be quite at your disposal, Mr. Mercer.'

'Thank you, Sir Frederick. I always felt certain she

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was alive, and you must forgive my saying I felt real ugly towards you as being answerable for the report that she was dead. I feel sure now it was not so, and that she fooled you just as I daresay she has fooled other people.' And with a courteous salute the bookmaker hurried off to look for a seat.

Sir Frederick said good-bye to his friend Dicky Chives, but did not think it necessary to enlighten him concerning his interview with Mercer.

As for that latter worthy, he had a strong suspicion that, if he didn't know exactly where Lady Hallaton might be at the present moment, he could at all events make a pretty good guess under what colours she was sailing.

CHAPTER XXXIV

SEEKING FOR HIDDEN TREASURE

It has been often said that men are apt to bear adversity better than they do prosperity, but this was not the case with Mr. Lydney. The bland, genial banker, with a cheery greeting and pleasant smile for everyone in the days of his affluence, had degenerated into a touchy, irritable man since trouble had come upon him. He had faced the first shock of misfortune resolutely enough, but narrow means, lack of occupation, and the morbid sensitiveness which led him to shrink even from seeing staunch friends soon told their tale. He tried the patience at times of those who still stood loyally by him, developing a cynical vein utterly foreign to his real nature. He had been more elated than he chose to confess over Fred Hallaton's reappearance in the light of a suitor for Mary's hand. Even in former times, when Fred had only the prospect of his uncle's inheritance, the banker would have been inclined to favour his suit providing only he had had Sir Robert's approval, but now that Fred Hallaton had come into his kingdom while he himself was a deposed monarch, he hugged the idea of this alliance to his heart. Mary would not only be

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handsomely provided for—and his daughter was very dear to him—but such a marriage as this, he thought, would go far to rehabilitate himself. But as the days slipped by, and Mary made no further reference to Fred Hallaton, Mr. Lydney got very uneasy. He felt tolerably sure that she had not heard from him, as the chances were that he himself would have seen the letter, and even if he had not she would have been sure to have mentioned that she had received one. This worried him a good deal. Had anything gone wrong, or—and the banker's brow darkened as the thought shot through his brain—could young Hallaton be such a blackguard as to be playing fast and loose with his girl for the second time?

If such ideas disturbed Mr. Lydney, it may be easily conceived that Mary's mind was far from at rest; true, she had not actually promised to be Fred Hallaton's wife, but he had seemed quite content by her admission that the thing was not impossible. If he had been as earnest as he professed to be she would have received a line ere this, even at the risk of a rebuke for writing to her. He had hinted to her that he should be shortly down at Exmouth again, and neither she nor her father had heard any more of that, and yet, considering the mischance that had happened to their first love, it was presumption on his part to feel so assured of her eventual consent. He must think that he had but to throw his handkerchief, and she was willing to drop into his arms; and Mary felt furious with herself as she thought that she had listened too readily to his overtures of reconciliation. Neither father nor daughter spoke of it to one another, but both grew exceedingly angry at the indolent manner in which Fred Hallaton seemed disposed to prosecute his wooing.

As for the culprit, he was quite aware at the bottom of his heart that he was not behaving fairly; he knew that on his return from Shillingford he ought to have written at once to Mary Lydney, told her the misunderstanding under which he had laboured, and humbly apologised for speaking as he had done, saying that he had unexpectedly received intelligence that his wife was alive, and that till the truth or falsehood of this report was thoroughly ascertained his mouth was closed. But he could not dash the

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cup of happiness from his lips whilst even a chance remained; he shrank from writing a letter which might determine his fate at once for good and all—shrank from it as men do from the final confession of ruin and disgrace; not that he could be blamed in this wise; his suit had been renewed in all honesty, but he knew also that a proud girl like Mary Lydney might say she would incur no risk of further mistakes; and who could blame her? He soothed himself with the idea that as soon as he knew anything definite he would carry such news as it might be personally to Exmouth. Yes, he should owe Mr. Lydney such explanation of his conduct, at least; while as for Mary, whether another interview should take place between them must be left to circumstances and her own wish.

The search for hidden treasure has ever had a strong attraction, and to a man of Mr. Tootell's temperament it was irresistible; the more he brooded over the fact the more he became convinced that there were some valuables concealed in that other pair of tables. What he expected to find he would have been puzzled to say, but would probably have vaguely defined it as 'valuables.' Thinking it over, day after day, Tootell had determined that he must have those tables; he was a careful man, and not given to throw his money about, but still he could afford to indulge his whim, and even if his quest should be unrequited there would be no great harm done. The first thing was to ascertain whether the tables were still in the banker's possession, and for this purpose he once more sought his old friend Abrams. That worthy told him he believed so. 'There is not much buying or selling goes on in my line without my being present, and I can only say I've never seen those tables put up since Mr. Lydney bought 'em.'

Tootell was rather puzzled at this. He stood in considerable awe of the banker, and was quite aware that Mr. Lydney was reported to be considerably soured by his misfortunes, and that to make him an offer for part of his furniture might simply result in a wrathful explosion on Mr. Lydney's part. He thought it would be better to approach him through his daughter, and resolved to take the earliest opportunity of speaking to Miss Lydney on the subject. But Mr. Abrams was deterred by no such scruples.

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Nothing stopped him in the way of business, and as everything he possessed was for sale at a price, it never occurred to him that anybody should regard their property in a different light. It was all a mere question of money. He accordingly called upon the banker, and having contrived to get in, that explosion which Mr. Tootell so deprecated speedily took place. Mr. Lydney was furious; he blazed out, and exclaimed that, although he might have lost a good bit of money, he was not so reduced as to sell his chairs and tables to the first pettifogging huckster that came along, and asked Mr. Abrams how he dared to come and make such an offer to him. As for the broker, he kept his temper, muttering something about having a customer who had a weakness for such things, and then bowed himself out as quickly as he could. He had no idea of hidden treasure in connection with the tables, but was haunted by the idea that they really were more valuable than he had supposed them to be, and that even were it otherwise he could always dispose of them profitably to Tootell.

When Mary, attracted by the high tones of her father's voice, entered the room she found Mr. Lydney in a state of great excitement.

'We have fallen so low that the very tradespeople look upon it we shall be only too glad to turn anything on the premises into money.' And then the banker told her all about Mr. Abrams' insulting offer, as he was pleased to term it, and finally abruptly inquired what had become of the tables. She told him how most of them had been sold, but that there were one or two still left in the upper rooms; but he was so excited that she did not tell him that two of them stood in her own boudoir, a room which her father seldom entered. The doctor had cautioned her always to discourage his talking over the events just preceding his mental attack, and she vainly endeavoured to change the subject; but the banker was thoroughly launched upon the theme now, and for the first time he told her of the mysterious message which had been sent him, and which had caused him to buy up the tables at the Dragon sale in such wholesale fashion. Then he told her how he had started off to identify, as he believed, the dead

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man who had sent him this message as that relative who many years before had abstracted those securities from the bank which had caused his ruin, only to find that the body was that of one whom he had never seen before, but whom the London police pronounced to be a notorious burglar of the name of Creasey. And then he went on, 'I got confused, and all became a muddle; and after I got home I recollect nothing more till I found myself in bed, very weak and ill. I believe still,' he added excitedly, 'if I hadn't lost my head, just when I wanted it, I was on the track of those papers, and might have found them.'

Mary soothed him as best she could, and strove hard to change the subject, but in vain. He clung to it with a pertinacity that somewhat alarmed her; although his mind had fairly recovered itself, yet he felt the failure of the bank severely, and she could not disguise from herself that he was both mentally and physically weaker. She had been much interested in her father's narrative, but became uneasy at the way he still dwelt on the subject. However, she at last drew him to talk of other things, though it was not without a petulant complaint that 'there was no use in telling her anything, she never attended to what he said.'

In that he was very unjust to Mary. She had followed his narration with the keenest interest, and was impatient to get back to her own room and think it all out by herself. Had she not been afraid of doing her father harm, she would gladly have questioned him further on many points, and she did firmly believe that he was right when he said that he had had the clue, although he had failed to follow it up. The whole story was strange, but surely this dying robber could never have sent her father such a message without some grounds. What object could he have had except to make restitution of property that had fallen into his hands, but which he had never been able to realise? Her father had given her to understand that the dead man was unmistakably not the perpetrator of the theft; how, then, had he become aware of where these papers were deposited, and why had such a singular place as a table in the ballroom of the old Dragon been selected? There were scores of questions on these points that she would have

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liked to put to her father, but that was impossible. Who was that wretched relative who had abstracted these papers? In the first place, had they been stolen from him? How had he parted with them? He was probably still alive, and could he be but found might give them some clue to the discovery of the missing securities. She would have liked much to read that message her father had had sent him from Ditchford herself. Well, she was afraid to ask for that, though she had little doubt that it had not been destroyed. Distracted by her thoughts, she resolved to take a turn on the sea wall. The tide was coming in, and the soft summer sun as it shone down upon Star Cross and the Warren bathed the mouth of the Exe in a golden glory. It braced up her nerves, and Mary determined resolutely that those papers should be found, her father's name cleared, and that it was her business to do it.

Hardly had she come to this resolution when she encountered Mr. Tootell. That gentleman raised his hat in his usual deprecatory fashion, and commenced by inquiring after the banker's health. Mary replied that her father was much as usual, and then, after a few incoherent remarks about the beauty of the day and the splendour of the summer generally, Mr. Tootell, after sundry 'hems' and 'haws,' notified that if Miss Lydney would not think it a liberty he was desirous of touching upon a little matter of business. He was a connoisseur of old tables, more especially those old-fashioned brass-inlaid walnut tables so much in fashion in the latter part of the last century; Mr. Lydney had bought a number of these at the sale of the old Dragon Inn. He knew that he had disposed of some of them, for he had afterwards picked them up himself. He didn't want to be intrusive, but should Mr. Lydney have any more to dispose of, he would take it as a great favour if he might be allowed the first refusal of them.

'My father has not the slightest intention of disposing of any of his furniture at present,' replied Mary, somewhat haughtily, 'but I will bear your request in mind should we ever think of leaving Exmouth,' and with a stately inclination of her head Miss Lydney left that garrulous table collector to his own reflections.

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'Singular,' she thought; 'what can it mean?—first Abrams, then Mr. Tootell. What is there about these tables that makes these men desirous of possessing them? They can have no dream that missing securities can possibly be discovered therein, or even valuables of any description. Pretty old tables, certainly, or I'd not have kept the pair I have. As for their being worth money in the curio way, I most certainly do not believe that. Still, after my father's strange story, it's odd that two men should have been trying to buy those tables to-day.' And, though better for her walk, Mary Lydney went home more puzzled than ever.

CHAPTER XXXV

MR. DICKINSON SEES HIS WAY

JOHN DICKINSON, inquiry agent, to whom Mr. Kirk had committed the tracing of Lady Hallaton, was a fair average sample of his class. If he had not that supernatural astuteness that distinguishes the detectives of Gaboriau or the heroes of Edgar Poe, he was still a very capable man, who, from constant practice in his vocation, had acquired the indispensable faculty of closely observing both what he saw and heard. The lawyer had sent him to Shillingford to start with, and he himself deemed that was the best place in which to commence his inquiries; but he very soon came to the conclusion that there was nothing further to be learnt there; that Lady Hallaton, for some mysterious reasons of her own, had for a brief period stayed at Shillingford there was no doubt, and that during her stay there a Mrs. Melrose had died was also clear; that she returned again to Shillingford and endeavoured to prove to Sir Frederick's lawyers that she was dead was also certain, and that when she left the place the second time she had assumed the dead woman's name Mr. Dickinson had no doubt. As for why she had done it, that the detective troubled his head little about. He had seen too much of the seamy side of life, had been engaged in too many shady cases, not to be able to

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picture plenty of reasons for a woman being desirous if possible of concealing her personality. It did not require any great intelligence to know that to find Lady Hallaton he must discover Mrs. Melrose.

John Dickinson was pretty confident of his own abilities, and, after he had thought the whole thing out, determined that the great question was to find out where Mrs. Melrose went in the first instance—and that he felt sure she would endeavour to conceal; she would not dare to change her name in Shillingford, but wherever she went from thence she would be known as Mrs. Melrose. Once let him come upon her under that name and the riddle was solved; to trace her he considered would be easy. It might take some time; it was possible she might change her name again. In his experience he had met with ladies of doubtful honesty and reputation who seemed to find change of air and change of name essential to their well-being. As he had anticipated, nobody could remember in the least where Mrs. Hallaton had gone to upon leaving. It was close upon two years since she had been there, and people did not recollect very much about her. Even the flyman, when discovered through the medium of her landlady, did not clearly remember taking her and her boxes to the station; but he certainly knew no more than that. Dickinson was puzzled; even Mrs. Hallaton's late landlady could furnish no information about her old lodger. No, she was a real lady, kept herself very much to herself. She never had a letter the whole time she was there. She was quite sure of that, because it struck her as remarkable such a handsome young woman should have no friends to write to her. She left no address on leaving, nor did she mention where she was going. She passed her time principally in reading. She went over to Canmouth once or twice. Except that she never went out of Shillingford. 'Canmouth? Ah, why shouldn't he try that?' He had failed to gather any tidings here; it might be he would have better luck at Canmouth. As for her not receiving any letters, Dickinson was aware that Mrs. Hallaton had her limited correspondence addressed to the Post Office; and a woman who would take that precaution was hardly likely to leave her letters about. Dickinson was off the very next day to

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Canmouth, and here accident put the end of the clue into his hand without his being in the first instance aware of it. He had gone into a stationer's shop to purchase some note-paper, and while he was being served he chanced to look over a small tray of photographs which was lying on the counter.

'Singularly handsome woman, sir,' said the shopman, alluding to the one his customer was holding; quite a romance that; it was just before I came here, but it made a great sensation in Canmouth. A young woman came here as housekeeper to Sir William Wrensley, and within two or three months he married her. Now they tell me she is a great beauty, and one of the most fashionable women in town.'

'Quite right; she is,' replied Dickinson. 'I wonder what her name was.'

'I have heard, but I forget,' replied the shopman; 'but I've no doubt there are plenty of people here who could tell you.'

Dickinson walked out of the shop, thinking it was something to have acquired a little bit of information about the fashionable Lady Wrensley. Knowledge of this kind at times turned out useful. Still he did not in the least connect this story with Lady Hallaton. He had no photograph of her, nor had he ever seen her. So that in the first instance it did not strike him that the Canmouth romance had anything to do with the affair he had in hand. In the beginning his inquiries after Mrs. Melrose were unsuccessful. Sarah had maintained her rank of lady housekeeper jealously, and had declined to be on chatty terms with the tradespeople. Many of them indeed only knew her as Sir William's new housekeeper, and had no idea what her name was, and although everybody recollected the marriage, and all the particulars about it, the name of the bride had escaped their recollection. Even amongst our friends and acquaintances we should be often puzzled to tell the maiden names of their wives, and therefore it was small wonder that Sarah's name should have melted out of the memories of Canmouth—although that she had been Sir William's housekeeper was indelibly impressed on them.

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But when Dickinson came to put things together, it flashed across him that here, perhaps, was the elucidation of the problem. He had so far troubled himself little about what had induced Mrs. Hallaton to change her name. Now, as he thought over the whole case, it flashed across him. Here was the temptation—an ambitious woman who had quarrelled with her husband, a poor man who had to seek his fortune in the East, had somehow discovered that the chance of marrying the well-to-do Sir William Wrensley lay within her grasp; that, under those circumstances, she would wish to destroy her personality was easy to understand. But what did puzzle him was why she should prefer to be Lady Wrensley instead of Lady Hallaton. Surely she must have known that poor, though her husband might be, he was heir to his uncle's title and fortune, and though he was not quite certain about it, he was under the impression that Sir Frederick must have come into the title and property before his wife married Sir William Wrensley. It was absurd to suppose this news had not reached Lady Hallaton's ears; there had probably been a paragraph about it in half the London papers. The quarrel between them must have been bitter indeed that could have led Lady Hallaton to endeavour to throw the past behind her, marry another man, enter the London world, and run the extraordinary risk of exposure she was incurring. No, it was impossible. Lady Wrensley and Lady Hallaton could not be the same woman. However, his business was to find Mrs. Melrose, and he had very far from worked out Canmouth as yet. Steadily pushing his inquiries, sometimes only to find blank denial of any such person ever having been in Canmouth, Dickinson ever and anon came across somebody who, after grave cogitation, decided that Sir William Wrensley's housekeeper must be the person he was inquiring after; she or he only knowing that Montrose, or Rosemont, or some such name, had been the name of that woman; 'what a rise it had been for her—she, who had come here as a mere housekeeper, was now a great lady in London!' These misty memories inclined Dickinson to the idea that, if he could but get at somebody with definite knowledge about Lady Wrensley in the housekeeper stage of her existence, a talk with them would amply repay him;

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and after sundry inquiries in various directions he was told that a Mrs. Thomson, Sir William's previous housekeeper, could perhaps tell him as much as anybody about her successor.

'She was a little sore, you see, he! he!' chuckled the grocer of whom he obtained this information, 'about being turned out. She had ruled old Miss Wrensley all her life, and she reckoned upon doing the same with Sir William pretty well as long as she lived. Looked after her pickings, too, the old woman did, and took care pretty stiff discount went into her pockets in all the dealings she had with me. Spiteful to this lady who succeeded her was no name for it, and 'pon my word, sir, I should never have been astonished to hear she had slipped poison into her Cadbury. She'll recollect her name, never fear, and tell you all about her; yes, all about her; but from her own point of view, mind,' and the communicative grocer laid his forefinger on his nose, and indulged in a confidential wink.

'Nice old lady, sir, Mrs. Thomson, all the same—has her prejudices like the rest of us. A grasping woman in the matter of discount, no doubt. Still, after ruling the roast all your life, it ain't pleasant to be turned adrift because your cookery ain't hot enough to suit an old Indian's inside.'

Mr. Dickinson gravely thanked his informant, and proceeded without delay to inquire the address of Mrs. Thomson. As a resident in Canmouth, that took him but a short time to obtain, and then, with the feeling of being on the right track, he set forth to see what he could get out of her.

Mrs. Thomson resided in Auckland Terrace, a row of small houses at the back of the town. Having found the number, the detective knocked at the door, and inquired of the drab of a girl who answered it whether Mrs. Thomson was at home. The answer was in the affirmative, and he was ushered into a cosy-looking parlour to await that lady's leisure. Two or three minutes and Mrs. Thomson made her appearance; a grave, gaunt woman with iron-grey hair and keen black eyes, who seated herself with much composure, and inquired somewhat stiffly what her visitor's business might be.

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'I am told,' said Dickinson, 'that you were at the head of Sir William Wrensley's household up to the time of his marriage.'

'Then you've been told wrong,' replied the lady, 'for I left him some weeks before he made a fool of himself. Perhaps you will come to the point at once, and say what it is you want.'

'I want to ask you a few questions about Lady Wrensley,' replied the detective.

'Drat it,' replied the ex-housekeeper tartly, 'I thought you were missions or chapels or something or other wanting money. They are always at me to subscribe to this, that, and the other. I wonder how much they suppose Sir William allows me.'

'My dear madam,' replied Dickinson, 'I assure you I only want a little information about Lady Wrensley.'

'The minx! It's my belief she only came there to marry Sir William. He didn't know what to be at, and was always fancying himself ill, and found fault with good wholesome English cooking; then he got this craze about lady housekeepers. Ladies indeed! I'd lady 'em. Why, the minute I'd set eyes on this Mrs. Melrose I knew what would be the end of it. A good-looking hussy like that, and sly as a fox. She queened it in rare style as soon as she got me out of the house, and as for Sir William, why she could turn him round her little finger.'

'Mrs. Melrose, that was her name, wasn't it?' said Dickinson, as soon as he could get in a word.

'Yes, Susan Melrose. I suppose she was handsome. At all events, the young men in Canmouth said she was. I never saw much in her; she was not my style.'

'You saw her married, I suppose?'

'No, I did not. They were married in London. But I know quite as much about it as anybody in the place.'

'You didn't like Mrs. Melrose?' said the detective.

'No; why should I? She came in and took my place, and then wheedled my master into marrying her. Old fool! the idea that he could be a match for a young woman like that. Why, she was sure to marry him, and she did.'

'I daresay you've seen the photograph of Lady Wrensley about Canmouth.'

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The housekeeper nodded.

'And you recognise them as pictures of Mrs. Melrose?'

'Certainly. Why, who else should they be? Haven't I been telling you all along that Mrs. Melrose and Lady Wrensley are the same woman?'

'Ah! true,' said Dickinson carelessly. 'I wanted a little information as to who Mrs. Melrose was.'

'What is it? What has she been doing?' asked the grim old woman eagerly. 'Is it anything bad? I can tell you more than anyone here about her. I not only knew her as Susan Melrose, but I know what her name was before that—or, at all events, what she chose to call herself.'

'Ah! What was that?' asked Dickinson somewhat eagerly in his turn.

'She had parcels addressed to her as Miss Mercer,' rejoined the housekeeper.

'Mercer,' said Dickinson slowly, for he was not aware of what had been Lady Hallaton's maiden name. But he rose, and after thanking Mrs. Thomson for the information she had given him, assured that lady, to her intense disgust, that it was only for the purpose of proving Lady Wrensley's claim to a small legacy that had fallen to her, and then walked out of the house, pretty clear in his own mind that he had a neat case of bigamy against Lady Hallaton.

CHAPTER XXXVI

MADAM M. X. W.

So satisfied was Dickinson with the result of his inquiries that he determined to pursue them no further. Having noted down Mrs. Thomson's address, and the dates or thereabouts of Mrs. Melrose's first appearance at Canmouth as Sir William's housekeeper, and secondly that of her marriage—on both of which points Mrs. Thomson's memory, if not precise to a day, was pretty accurate—he departed for town. Two trifling links wanting to complete his chain of

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evidence—the identification of Lady Wrensley's photograph with Lady Hallaton, and the knowledge of the maiden name of Sir Frederick's wife. Both of these the baronet could, of course, furnish. As far as the detective went the case was complete, and, as he complacently assured himself, most satisfactory.

On arrival in town he carried his story to Mr. Kirk, and the old lawyer listened to it with no little interest. 'No more to be done, Mr. Dickinson,' he observed quietly, when the latter had finished. 'The investigation does you every credit, and I shall have the pleasure of handing you a handsome cheque for your services. For the present you will be good enough to keep your lips closed. We shall no doubt want all the evidence you have collected, but I must, of course, consult my client first. I think it's the most audacious thing I ever heard of in all my experience.'

'The extraordinary thing about it, sir,' replied the detective, 'is that Lady Hallaton should be in utter ignorance of her husband having succeeded to the title and property, and she must have been a woman of that stamp, Mr. Kirk, as knows nothing of such weaknesses as love or passion. They crave for wealth, dress, and position. All this she virtually had, and therefore I feel sure that she could not have been aware of it, or she never would have committed herself so madly as she has done.'

'Ah!' said the lawyer, with the calm voice of a man engaged in a curious and analytical discussion, 'you have encountered this type before?'

'Yes, sir,' replied the detective; 'calculating, clever women, all of them. They never lose their heads, but they make mistakes. We all do, for the matter of that; only when you are travelling the shady side of the law a mistake is apt to be fatal.'

'Just so,' replied Mr. Kirk; 'and when her ladyship knows we are in possession of all the facts, she will no doubt see the game is up, and give us no further trouble, but will simply accede to any terms Sir Frederick may propose. Good morning, Mr. Dickinson.'

'Can't do anything else,' replied the detective. 'Clever woman, no doubt; but she can't face a thing like this:

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the idea is ridiculous.' And with that Mr. Dickinson took his departure.

'Brass it out,' muttered the detective as he descended the staircase. 'Yes, it's wonderful how they will if they're brought to bay. Still, it ain't likely Sir Frederick wants to be hard on her. He wants to get rid of her, no doubt; that's about what he wants, and he can't have much trouble about that.'

The old lawyer sat for some time thinking over the case. There could be no doubt about it, and naturally Sir Frederick would at once take steps to free himself from his wife; and about this it was impossible to avoid some publicity. The law only could sever the bonds that the Church had tied; and, now he came to think of it, Mr. Kirk wondered where the marriage ceremony had taken place between the two. He had no thought of the worthless woman, and the consequences that must ensue to her from the exposure, but he did pity the two men whom she had wronged. Sir William was, perhaps, the most to be commiserated, as it was as Lady Wrensley that the culprit had flaunted in fashionable society. Some scandal there must be, but the less the better; and, as far as the legal proceedings necessary were concerned, they would fortunately be of the briefest.

It was the middle of September, and Sir William Wrensley was getting tired of the German baths at which they were staying, and strongly urged upon his wife the advisability of their returning to London. He longed for his clubs and the society of his old friends, and pointed out that people were drifting back to town; and, if not so full as in the season, yet there were always plenty of people in London by the beginning of October. Sarah, too, had quite recovered all her audacity, which the unexpected return of Hallaton had somewhat disturbed. She clung to the social success she had attained, and determined she would not relinquish it without a struggle. She told Sir William she was feeling much better, and should be quite ready to return in another week or two; and in the meantime racked her brains as to how she was to keep her place in the London world, and yet avoid the risk of meeting her husband.

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She was sitting idly one morning, pretending to read an English newspaper, but in reality turning over in her mind this perplexing question. If she could only find out what Sir Frederick was doing—what was his manner of life, where he was at this particular time; he might be shooting or fishing, in the country, in Scotland. Suddenly some four or five advertisements headed, 'Detective Offices,' 'Detective Agencies,' &c., caught her eye. The very thing she wanted. How stupid of her not to think of it before! She would employ one of those men as soon as she got back. He would surely be able to find out whether her husband was in town, and all about his mode of life. She would know where she was then, could calculate what risk she ran, and how best to minimise it; and if, in her judgment, it should prove more than she dared run, then she must once more plead ill-health, and persuade her complaisant medical adviser to order her abroad for the winter. 'Detective agency, John Dickinson; prompt, secret, and reliable; Arundel Street, Strand.' Yes, that would do. As soon as ever she got back she would call upon Mr. Dickinson, who no doubt would undertake to do what she wanted when he was informed that he would be well paid for it. From that day, to Sir William's great delight, her ladyship seemed as anxious to get home as he was, and something like a week saw them once more established in their old house in Tyburnia.

Sarah had a natural genius for intrigue, but, as Mr. Dickinson had said, clever women of her type do make mistakes. She had made a grave mistake, in the first instance, in not seeking a little information concerning her husband before her bigamous marriage. One line to Mr. Kirk would have informed her of the change that had taken place in Sir Frederick's fortunes, and that he (Mr. Kirk) was now empowered to pay her a very handsome allowance instead of the humble pittance which had so far been her lot. She was now making another in placing herself in the hands of Mr. John Dickinson. She had written him a note on perfectly plain paper, making an appointment with him, but she had given no address, and therefore could receive no reply to her letter. However, a little after the appointed time she sallied forth, plainly dressed, and, having walked

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as far as the Marble Arch, hailed a hansom, and drove quickly to her destination. On arrival in Arundel Street she was shown into a plainly furnished room, looking something like the outer chamber of a lawyer's office. There a clerk requested her to take a chair, and said Mr. Dickinson would see her in a few minutes. The lad made no attempt to ask her name, Mr. Dickinson's clients being reticent on that point for the most part. She was shortly shown into the inner sanctuary, and, though it took a good deal to surprise Mr. Dickinson, he afterwards described it to one of his intimates as 'the rummiest start ever I saw.' He recognised her at once. He, of course, knew Lady Wrensley by sight, as did a great many other Londoners; and, if he had been asked the last person whom he expected to see in his office, he might have named her.

He handed her a chair. 'You wish to consult me, madam, on private business. This, as you are aware, is a secret inquiry office.'

Sarah bowed assent.

'And as, in my opinion, the value of such an office depends upon its transactions being conducted with the most implicit secrecy, I need scarcely say that that is a fundamental rule with me.'

Sarah looked at him for a moment, hesitating what to say. She did not want to disclose herself, and yet fancied that this must be the next thing required of her.

'Madam,' continued Mr. Dickinson, 'may I ask what is it you desire to inquire into? Strict secrecy, as I have already said, is the maxim of my establishment. It is quite possible that you may desire even your own name to remain a mystery to me. Let me know what you want and that may be quite possible. I have no wish to intrude on your confidence, and if I can ascertain what you want without any knowledge of yourself, you shall be Madam X. Y. or Z. to me, if you desire it.'

'I prefer not to disclose my name,' replied Sarah. 'I wish to know where Sir Frederick Hallaton is, what are his usual habits, what are his intentions,—in short, everything about him.'

'You ask a good deal, madam,' replied Mr. Dickinson, with a slightly sneering smile. 'Where Sir Frederick

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Hallaton is, and what his habits are, will probably not be difficult to ascertain, but what a human being's intentions may be, I tell you honestly, is beyond me to discover. To get rid of his wife perhaps. To run away with somebody else's perchance.'

The detective looked keenly at Lady Wrensley as he fired this last shot, but Sarah blanched not an iota.

'I wish what I tell you,' she replied, imperiously. 'I was wrong; his intentions are of course beyond you, but his whereabouts and his manner of life you should be easily able to ascertain.'

'Madam is probably a relation of Sir Frederick Hallaton,' rejoined Dickinson.

'What has that to do with it?' cried Sarah fiercely. 'Who I am or what I am matters nothing to you. Tell me where Sir Frederick Hallaton is, and what are his usual habits! Secrecy, you said; secrecy it shall be! And so far as you are concerned I am Madam X. Do you understand me now, sir?'

'Perfectly well,' replied Mr. Dickinson suavely. 'To ascertain what you wish to know about Sir Frederick Hallaton should not be difficult. I am, of course, presuming that he is well known about town, as the name is unfamiliar to me.'

After delivering himself of this falsehood the detective paused for a moment to see its effect. No such tortuous trade as his could be conducted with veracity, and thoroughly aware of the pitfalls that lie in wait for the story-teller, no more practised liar than Mr. John Dickinson was perhaps extant.

'He has just returned from abroad,' replied Lady Wrensley; 'he has lately inherited his uncle's property and title, and arrived in London last July. Where he stayed I never knew, and where he is now I have no idea. But a baronet with some thousands a year is surely not difficult to find in the United Kingdom.'

'I should think not, madam. Would it be impertinent to ask from what point of view you are making this inquiry? Have you a claim to enforce? Is it a question of contested property or'—and here Mr. Dickinson lowered his voice, and then added confidentially, 'is there another lady in the case?'

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It was a perfect piece of acting. Nobody could have supposed that Mr. Dickinson was quite aware of the whole case, and could have ascertained Sir Frederick's whereabouts in a few hours.

'It matters nothing to you, sir. I prefer to remain unknown, and that my reasons should be so also. Do what I tell you, or say it is beyond you, and I will obtain the assistance I require elsewhere.'

'I will do what you want,' replied Dickinson, 'without further comment.' It was evident to him that Lady Wrensley was accustomed to have her own way, and to carry things with a high hand.

'You will excuse me, madam; but all investigations of this nature are attended with more or less expense, and therefore I must ask you——'

'How much do you want?' interposed Sarah, impetuously. 'Will 20*l.* do to begin with?'

'Say 25*l.*,' replied the detective.

'Here it is,' she rejoined, as she took the notes from her purse. 'Remember, time is everything to me. You shall have as much more if you bring me the information within a week;' and Sarah rose to go.

One moment, madam,' said Dickinson. 'You forget I have neither your name nor address, and I do not wish to put you to the inconvenience of calling here until I have something to tell you. As I am therefore unable to write to you, I must communicate with you through the columns of the Press. Will you choose your paper and initials, please?'

'Ah, I had forgotten,' exclaimed Sarah.

'Shall we say the second column of the *Times*? As soon as I've anything to tell you I will insert one line in that paper. "M. X. W.—Please call." Will that do, madam?'

'Perfectly,' replied Sarah, and with a slight inclination of her head to the detective as he opened the door for her she passed out.

'Well, this is a game,' said Mr. Dickinson as he threw himself back in his chair. 'I don't wonder at her getting a bit anxious about Sir Frederick's whereabouts. If she knew all, I think she would come to the conclusion that it

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really didn't much matter, that it was all up, and the best thing she could do would be to pack up her traps and bolt. I think in a few days I will give her the straight tip, and she can't say then that I haven't honestly earned her fifty pounds.'

People's ideas of honesty differ, and Mr. Dickinson's profession was not calculated to foster a high standard of morality. It was not quite the first time that he had taken money from both sides, but it certainly was the only occasion in which husband and wife had retained his services against each other, although, as far as Sir Frederick was concerned, the detective had never seen him.

CHAPTER XXXVII

FACE TO FACE

SARAH, when she gained the street, turned up towards Covent Garden, intending to take a cab thence to her own house. As she reached the market she suddenly found herself face to face with her brother. Lady Wrensley—to keep her fraudulently-obtained designation—started. She, most assuredly, did not wish to meet Sam. She was not afraid of his betraying her, but he could be no assistance to her. Such as her game was she must play it alone; but Sam, in his own way, was—as his friends said—'straight,' and was likely to give her a bit of his mind if he was aware of her offending. Was he? That was just what she did not know.

'Well, my Lady,' said the bookmaker, as he took her hand, 'you seem to have "shook" your relations pretty slick since you've become a swell. You needn't have been afraid of my dropping in upon you—not likely.'

'How could I, Sam? After that dreadful business of father's I did not even know where he was, and I dared not inquire.'

'What has that to do with me?' inquired her brother, roughly. 'I haven't welched the Government, nor done

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anything else I need go in hiding for. I only wish the rest of you had been as honest.'

'I had a difficult game to play,' she replied.

'Nothing like so difficult as you have now,' he interposed.

'Fred and I could not get on together; he taunted me with father's crime. My temper's hot, and we separated in a few weeks.'

'I know all that. Why didn't you write to me? Let's turn down the side aisle of the market; there's no one there, and I must have a talk with you.'

'Why should I?' replied Lady Wrensley, as she complied. 'What could you have done for me? Fred allowed me enough to live on. It wasn't likely that I should wish to attract attention while that story was going the rounds of the papers.'

'You might have wanted to hear of your father and mother.'

'I did; but it was not likely that you knew where they were.'

'Not writing to me, Sarah, was the biggest mistake you ever made,' rejoined the bookmaker grimly. 'I saw your husband the other day.'

Sarah's heart jumped, and she barely restrained herself from blurting out, 'Which?' How much did Sam know, and how much had he unconsciously betrayed? Recovering her composure by a strong effort, she inquired quietly, 'Where?'

'At Doncaster. I had met him before that at Stockbridge, and he told me you were dead.'

There was no doubt Sam was speaking of Sir Frederick. 'It is best so,' said Sarah, after a pause. 'We can never live together, and I want nothing from him.'

'Then how, pray, do you intend to live? A woman's fixings are not much in my line, but a rig out like that costs a pile of dollars I reckon.'

'That's nothing to you,' replied Sarah imperiously. 'I have as much money as I want, and you need not be afraid of my coming to you.'

'Fool,' said Sam, fiercely, as he clutched her wrist. 'Didn't I tell you that I saw your husband again at Don-

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caster? He don't know where you are, but he's discovered lately that you are alive. Do you suppose that your secret will remain long undiscovered? Do you think I don't know who pays for your frocks? The world thinks you Sir William Wrensley's wife. Before long it will be known you are his mistress.'

'How dare you say such things?' cried Sarah, white with rage. 'You would never bring such a charge against your sister.'

'No,' said Sam, 'it's quite enough to see one's sister go the wrong side the post without calling attention to it. But do you suppose it will be long before Sir Frederick finds you out? He behaved well. He made an honest woman of you.'

'He ruined my life. He deceived me,' she replied vehemently. 'I thought he was rich. He was a mere pauper, and was ashamed of me. Me, whom the best men in London are proud to be seen with.'

'He's rich enough now; if you'd only had a little patience! He's not likely to forgive, and as soon as he knows all he'll rid himself of you.'

'I want nothing of him,' she rejoined proudly.

'No, but he'll want to regain his freedom. He'll want to marry again most likely. There was Miss Lydney, for instance, whom he was said to be sweet on till you came between them.'

'What, that pale-faced Mary Lydney!' said Sarah, fiercely; and a bitter remembrance of how jealous she had been of the banker's daughter in the old Exmouth days, when she had been in love with Fred Hallaton as far as she was capable of caring for anyone, shot through her brain.

'He shall never do that.'

'What does it matter to you who it is, and how can you prevent it?' said Sam, drily. 'Old Lydney's bust up, and Sir Frederick is not a match girls will turn up their noses at now.'

Do you mean Lydney's bank has broke?' inquired Sarah, as a curious look came across her face.

'Yes, so Dr. Nicholl told me. There were lots of papers and securities missing which had been lodged with

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old Lydney for safety, and it seems he just realised them and went on paying interest over them for years, till at last it came out. Couldn't pay interest any longer, I reckon.'

'All I ask you is not to betray me,' rejoined Sarah, sullenly; 'and now put me into a cab.'

'I'll give you one last bit of advice,' said Sam, as he handed her into a hansom; 'be off to the Continent as soon as you can. Go before you're called on "to face the music."'

Sarah shrugged her shoulders contemptuously. She would not admit to her brother that she was at all dismayed at her position, and yet as she drove homewards she was fain to admit that it was getting desperate. It was curious, but though she had regarded an exposé as imminent should Sir Frederick discover she was alive, it had never occurred to her that he would at once seek to have his marriage legally dissolved, and yet, of course, that would be the very thing he would do. She had counted on his sparing her the disgrace of a prosecution for bigamy, forgetting that would be out of his power. To obtain his own release it would be necessary to prove her bigamous marriage with Sir William Wrensley. Could not all this be done without exposure, she wondered? Things were kept out of the papers sometimes. Why not this? She was more anxious about retaining the place she had won in society than as to what might be the consequences of her crime. Then, oddly enough, ran through her bosom a furious pang of jealousy at the idea of Hallaton marrying Mary Lydney. She did not want to go back to him, although he was the one man she had had a caprice for, but she raged at the idea of the banker's daughter queening it on the throne she had resigned. Anyone but her. Sarah regretted the way she had played her cards, but it was only because she might have gratified her social vanity quite as well as Lady Hallaton, and been under no fear of legal consequences, or the being cast out into the wilderness, and not from love of Sir Frederick. On the contrary, she could do what she willed with Sir William, and from her brief experience, she knew that Hallaton had a temper much akin to her own. What had she better do; and, with all her audacity, Sarah was utterly nonplussed. Why had his uncle left him that property? If he had returned

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in ten years' time and a poor man, the chances are he would never have troubled her. The marriage of Mrs. Hallaton would have passed out of people's minds, and who would have cared to rake up the old story of their elopement, or ask what had become of her?

When she reached home Sarah went straight to her own boudoir, with the set purpose of determining on her future course without delay. There was no doubt about it, she ran the risk of losing everything for which she had played. Surely there must be some way of avoiding this threatened scandal. Money could do so much. Let Sir Frederick free himself from her if he would. All she would ask him was that he should spare her the appearance of the case in the newspapers. In her ignorance she actually supposed that if he would only consent this was possible. For his own sake he would probably shrink from publicity, and if, in his wrath at discovering her infidelity, he should wish to avenge himself, well, then she had one card still left in her hand which might make him forego that vengeance. If her brother were right, some lost papers were mainly the cause of Mr. Lydney's ruin. She had something to tell about that. She had said that Fred Hallaton should never marry Mary Lydney. Bah! that was but the shrieking of an angry woman. He should. She would help him to do so, providing he paid her price for that assistance, and to clear the good name of his intended father-in-law must be a great object in Hallaton's eyes. He had taunted her with being the daughter of a fraudulent publican long ago. Was there much difference between her and the daughter of a fraudulent banker? An ugly sneer played round her handsome mouth as the thought struck her. There had been no publicity given to their marriage. Why should it be necessary for its dissolution? No, let the ill-starred union be as privately set aside as it had been solemnised, and she would do her best to help Sir Frederick to recover those missing papers. Sarah's busy brain was weaving schemes upon the vaguest assumptions. She had no positive assurance, for instance, that Hallaton wished to marry Mary Lydney; neither did she nor Sam even know that he had been down to Exmouth since his return to England, but she felt the ground was crumbling beneath her feet, that the pinnacle

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of fashion she had attained with such splendid effrontery rocked beneath her. She bid fair to share the fate of any other jay in peacock's plumes, of any other adventuress whom exposure comes upon. She was resolute not to succumb without a struggle, and if nerve and brain could pull a woman through such a strait Sarah had them. Those papers, now what could she recollect about them? She wished she had listened more attentively the night she overheard her father and Brent talking about them. But they spoke in low tones, and were obviously fearful that their conversation might reach other ears than their own. Had she only attached importance to it then, Sarah thought, it would have gone hard if she had not gathered as much of it as would have served her turn. Brent and her father always looked askance at her if she lingered late in the bar-parlour, and showed a manifest desire to be relieved of her company; in short, more than once her father had bade her go to bed, saying Brent and he had business to talk over. Well, she knew all about that business now, but about these papers she was not so clear. Still, she'd good reason to believe they were in the possession of either her father or Brent. If the former, she could count, she thought, on his great love for her to make them over to her in her extremity, and, if the latter, to exert his influence with Brent. Money, no doubt, would be a consideration. Well, she had it; ah, plenty, if that was all. Ever sanguine, Sarah already fancied she saw a way through her difficulties.

A clever, unscrupulous woman, but falling into the common enough error that others can be induced to regard matters from her point of view, and that what conduces to her own interests must also be to the benefit of theirs.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ACTING FOR BOTH SIDES

LADY WRENSLEY, after her interview with Dickinson, kept a sharp eye on the second column of the *Times*. She had not long to wait. On the third morning the single line 'M. X. W.—Please call' met her eye, and Sarah lost no time

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in repairing to the detective's office. She had thought this thing out, and quite persuaded herself that, could she but see her husband, she could easily persuade him to do what she wished. Surely he would agree with her that this little episode of their lives had best be kept a secret. As Sam had pointed out to her, Sir Frederick would be resolute to sever the link that bound them. Well, so be it, she wanted nothing from him, and would render him every assistance in her power. All she deprecated was publicity. It was all nonsense, there must be some way of dissolving marriage where both sides were willing to do so without advertising the fact in the newspapers. Details of that sort would be for Sir Frederick or the lawyers to take upon themselves. It would have occurred to most people that if the thing were possible at all, it would be best left for the lawyers to manage from the outset, but Sarah laid great stress upon a personal interview with her husband. She had so queened it over men of late that she could not realise one refusing to do her bidding; then she made the additional mistake of supposing that there must be some remnant left on his part of the love she had whistled down the wind. She recollected only the sunny moments of the early part of that idyll, and forgot the storms and tempests with which it had terminated. Did she but know it, it was just that latter part of their conjugal life that Hallaton remembered best. He did not as yet know that she had been faithless to him, but he was full of bitter regret for what he called his mad marriage; and, the mystery of her disappearance once unravelled, had no desire to see or hear of her again. But Sarah thought her persuasive powers, joined to the information she could procure him concerning those lost papers, would bring about his consent to her wishes.

On arrival at Mr. Dickinson's she was at once ushered in to the detective's sanctum. He had experienced no difficulty in discovering where Sir Frederick was living, and what was his manner of life.

'Now, madam,' said Dickinson, 'as soon as Lady Wrensley was seated. 'I will just run over what I have discovered that I think may interest you, and, of course, will be then ready to answer any questions you may put to

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me. To begin with, Sir Frederick occupies rooms in Grafton Street, he dines chiefly at his clubs, principally at the Thermopolium. He is not much given to society, and is constantly away from London for a few days at a time racing, to which sport he seems strongly addicted. I can easily go somewhat closer into the details of his daily life if you wish it, but nothing more occurs to me just at present. If you will either question me, or give me instructions concerning any particular point you wish cleared up—'

'Exactly. Stay a moment while I think,' interposed Lady Wrensley, as she ran the detective's report rapidly over in her mind. Does not go much into society, she mused. So much the better. Goes racing a good deal. Good again; keeps him out of town and out of my way. Racing doesn't amuse me. 'Does he shoot?' she inquired abruptly at last.

'I don't know,' replied the detective; and then he muttered to himself, 'What an extraordinary question.'

'No, no; that's not what I mean. Does he go into the country? Does he go visiting at country houses? In short, when he leaves London is it always to attend race meetings?'

'As far as I have learnt, yes,' said Dickinson, 'except when he runs down to Oaklands.'

'What's that?' inquired Lady Wrensley, sharply.

'Sir Frederick's seat in Kent,' madam.

'Ah! I had forgotten,' replied Sarah, who really had no knowledge of such a place. 'Listen,' she continued. 'Do you know whether he has been in Devonshire since his return to England?'

'I can't say,' replied Dickinson, 'but I daresay I could find out.'

'Do so. And now you know where this man's rooms are; you can easily ascertain at what time he is likely to be in them. Find out for me what day and at what hour I shall be able to find him in.'

'What!' exclaimed Dickinson, for once fairly startled out of his politeness and dumbfounded with astonishment. 'Well, of all the goes. I beg pardon, madam, I was a little surprised.'

'And may I ask, Mr. Dickinson, what there is in my

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order to surprise you?' retorted Lady Wrensley, with extreme hauteur, and speaking with great deliberation.

'Oh, nothing, nothing, madam,' replied the detective a little confusedly. As he said afterwards, talking the thing over with some of his friends, 'You never know where to have a woman of that sort. She'd circulated a report of her death; she'd employed me to ascertain her husband's haunts and habits. She had every reason to, and, as I thought, every intention of keeping out of his way, and by jingo, at the last moment, she proposes to walk straight into his den—the one man in the world I supposed she was anxious to avoid. Talk about the ducks coming to be killed after that.'

'Well, sir, are you going to do my bidding?' said Sarah imperiously.

For a few moments Dickinson hesitated. He was not the man to throw away a chance of making money, and he felt sure that Lady Wrensley could and would pay him handsomely for his services, but if she and Sir Frederick were to meet, there was an end of them, and, indeed, it struck him as probable that was already the case. Sir Frederick, as soon as he knew the truth, would be sure to put matters into the hands of his lawyers with a view to having his marriage annulled. Having arrived at this conclusion, Mr. Dickinson determined reluctantly that his game was up, and resolved to retire gracefully from the business.

'I will do what you wish. But, excuse me, do you think it judicious, Lady Wrensley?'

'What! you know me?' cried Sarah, starting.

'I recognised you the moment you set foot in this room,' he replied. 'Men of my calling are close observers, and Lady Wrensley's photograph is in the shop windows.'

It had been very gratifying at the time, but Sarah had already discovered that it had its inconveniences. 'No matter,' she said. 'I have my reasons for wishing to see Sir Frederick Hallaton. Arrange that interview for me, and you will find that I am no niggard.'

'Lady Wrensley,' replied the detective, 'has it never occurred to you that you would be better abroad just now? I say so in all friendliness.'

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She turned upon him like a hunted stag. She saw in his usually impassible face that he knew all. She was at bay, but she bated not one whit of her splendid audacity as she rejoined haughtily, 'You will take my orders, Mr. Dickinson, but I do not require your advice.'

'She's a rare plucked one,' he muttered to himself. 'Lady Wrensley—or, Lady Hallaton, I should say—I know your whole history from the time you were Miss Mercer of the old Dragon Inn.'

'We will not discuss that. You are probably misinformed. It does not signify; but you will do my bidding'—and here Sarah took out her purse—'and hold your tongue. Is it not so?'

'Whether I do or don't does not matter; I could tell Sir Frederick nothing he does not already know. Many thanks!' he continued as he thrust the notes she proffered him into his waistcoat pocket. 'Don't see him, but go foreign is my advice, whether you want it or not,' and Dickinson, dropping his previous air of deference, rather brutalised his counsel.

He wished the woman no harm, but Sarah's arrogance had rather nettled him, and in his sight she was merely an adventuress on the verge of exposure with an excellent chance of undergoing imprisonment for bigamy.

'You will do what I tell you,' replied Sarah, utterly ignoring his last remark. 'You can communicate in the same way as before. Insert the day and the hour upon which I can depend upon finding Sir Frederick in the *Times*, for M. X. W., and I shall be sure to see it. Good morning!'

'Well,' said Mr. Dickinson, as he closed the door upon his client, 'I wonder what sort of a man Sir F. is? If he's weak there's no saying what that handsome wife of his might not induce him to do. She's a will of iron and not a particle of heart. More than a match for most men. Mrs. Thomson was right; Sir William Wrensley was a child in her hands. Of course she married him. The puzzle about it is, why she did it. In ignorance of her husband's good fortune, no doubt; and how mad she must have been when she discovered the mistake she'd made! The interview between her and Sir Frederick will be curious.'

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Sarah walked away from the detective's office no whit shaken in her resolve, and by no means hopeless of carrying her point. What object could Sir Frederick have in exposing her? No, for his own sake, he would desire their legal separation without publicity as much as she did; and then she wondered whether the audacious scheme she had formed was feasible. It would cost something perhaps, but money could do anything in this world. If she only knew where those papers were! That she considered the weak point in her game just at present, but she had good grounds for supposing that she would obtain possession of them before long. Sam knew her father's address. She could rely, she thought, upon his love for herself to help her; while both he and his partner Brent were fond of money. Money again! She felt pretty confident that those papers were to be bought. There was, however, no time to be lost; exposure was imminent if that man Dickinson were right. Sir Frederick already knew all, and she dreaded lest he should take some false step, as she euphemistically called legal proceedings, before she could see him. Her belief in herself was unbounded. That Dickinson had discovered her whole history she did not care much about. It was the business of those sort of prying people to know everything; but she was conscious that she ran daily risk of people round and about Exmouth identifying Lady Wrensley with Sarah Mercer by means of that widely circulated photograph. That Dickinson would carry his knowledge to market she had no doubt; but if he was right in saying Sir Frederick was already in possession of it, then the man from whom she would fain have kept her guilty secret had nothing to learn. That the detective spoke the truth she did not doubt. Sam had told her that Sir Frederick knew she was alive, and if he had discovered that much it was quite probable that he had penetrated the mystery of Mrs. Melrose. On the whole, Lady Wrensley came to the conclusion they were just as well as they were. It would have been necessary in any case to carry out her scheme that Sir Frederick should be made aware of her present position. Well, he was so, and the telling of a long preliminary story was saved. They would be able to come at once to business.

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As Dickinson had said, 'when you are travelling the shady side of the law mistakes are apt to prove fatal.' Utterly unscrupulous herself, Sarah could not understand scruples in others. She flattered herself the idea that had entered her head was so much to their mutual interest that Sir Frederick could not but accede to it, and the restoration of those papers, she thought, would be a heavy bribe to dangle before his eyes, even if he should hesitate. Oddly enough, the thing that troubled Sarah most about the desperate game she was about to propose was that she should have to give up Frederick Hallaton to Mary Lydney. She did not care for him any longer herself—it may be questioned whether she ever had, or was really capable of genuine affection for any man—but she always had been, and was still, jealous of the banker's daughter. Only she felt that it would be probably necessary to gain her ends, far from proposing to restore those papers she would have gone out of her way to destroy them if thereby she could have hindered Hallaton's marriage with that white faced chit, as she always designated Mary, whose delicate complexion offered a striking contrast to her own dusky brunette tints. She was conscious, though she could hardly bear to own it to herself, that she had won Fred by a *coup de main*, and that in his heart of hearts he had always loved Mary best.

Not the first man by many who has lost his head in the intoxication of a woman's smile, and paid a far heavier penalty for his mistake than has so far befallen Fred Hallaton.

CHAPTER XXXIX

MR. KIRK HAS A WARM MORNING

Mr. Kirk lost no time in communicating with Sir Frederick, telling him that Lady Hallaton had been discovered, and begging him to call at his office at once, as it was necessary that he should see him without delay. 'It is a very singular and painful story I have to tell you, and we shall need

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your instructions concerning it,' wrote the old lawyer; but he discreetly forebore from committing the story to paper. He knew his client was a violent tempered man, and Mr. Kirk thought it was best that the history of Sarah's misconduct should be told by his own lips.

'I have no doubt that fellow Dickinson is right in his deductions,' he muttered musingly. 'Those men see a good deal of the seamy side of life. She was ignorant that her husband had succeeded to his uncle's title and estates. The woman is a born intriguer. She believed she'd made a matrimonial fiasco, and without the slightest hesitation she buries the past, and calls for fresh cards and a fresh deal. Ah, there's a grand simplicity about the idea, and if it was but practicable a good many of us would try the same thing; unfortunately we cannot wipe out the past, even though our record be blameless.'

Daily expecting it though he was, Mr. Kirk's letter was nevertheless a shock to Sir Frederick. An important event in our lives is so momentous an affair to ourselves that we can never realise that the world in general takes no note of it. Sir Frederick never imagined that his accession to fortune so soon after their marriage would not eventually come to Sarah's ears, and despite the fact that she had taken such pains to efface herself, he still vaguely thought that had she been alive she would have demanded to participate in his improved means. Mr. Kirk's letter dispelled this dream, and he had now no excuse for not instantly acquainting Mary Lydney with the fact that he was not a free man, and had been mistaken in thinking himself so. An awkward letter to have to write, and made none the easier by the writing of it having been delayed. Still, he would see Mr. Kirk first, and hear what explanation there might be of Sarah's extraordinary conduct. His astonishment knew no bounds as the old lawyer told the story of Dickinson's discoveries, that Lady Hallaton had undoubtedly committed bigamy, and was now known to the world as the beautiful Lady Wrensley.

'Why, good heavens!' he exclaimed, 'I might have met her anywhere. I am not much of a society man, or I most likely should have done. She's one of the fashion-

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able ladies whose doings are always chronicled in the gossip journals.'

'Lady Hallaton would be sure to know of your arrival in England, and doubtless took good care that should not happen. I wonder, though, you never saw Lady Wrensley's photograph.'

'It is odd, but I never did. After all, the season was half over, and the print-shops never offered much attraction to me. But, Kirk, I breathe again! Hah!' he exclaimed, springing from his chair and pacing tumultuously up and down the room, 'I am free; yes, free! By G—, man, I can cast that woman from my life and have done with her! The law will rid me of her. Do what you will, but do it at once. Break me this marriage as quickly as possible.'

'There will be no difficulty about that,' replied Mr. Kirk, 'but the law cannot be hurried. The case is perfectly clear in every link. There will be doubtless plenty of people to prove the identity, and testify that Lady Hallaton and Lady Wrensley are the same person.'

'Then the sooner they do it the better,' said Sir Frederick hotly. 'Let the adulteress stain my name no longer!'

'Tut, tut! Sir Frederick, you forget that the lady is at present masquerading under another name. That you should desire to be free from her as quickly as possible is only natural; but we must show a little consideration to Sir William. Mind you, from all I can learn, he is in complete ignorance of her ladyship's antecedents. Society will fiercely resent the fraud he has unwittingly committed on it.'

'Yes,' said the Baronet, 'when it finds that the woman who has been queening it over them is a bigamist, and a publican's daughter, in their mortification they will desire to rend someone or somebody. I can have no animosity against Wrensley, and no wish to make things more unpleasant for him than need be. Manage it your own way, so long as there is no delay; but remember, *before everything*, no delay.'

'I understand,' said the lawyer. 'I'll put myself in communication with Sir William immediately, and at

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once take the preliminary steps for the dissolution of the marriage. Our case is so strong that Lady Hallaton is not likely ever to face it. She will probably fly to the Continent as soon as she hears of it.'

'Ah,' said Sir Frederick, as he put on his hat, 'you don't quite know Lady Hallaton. She's nerve and pertinacity enough for anything. No time to be lost, mind!' and with a friendly nod to Mr. Kirk the Baronet took his departure.

'Ah,' said the old lawyer, 'for a man who made such a precious mess of it to start with, he looks like having the luck to get out of the scrape pretty easily. I wonder what Sir William will say when he gets my letter. It will be a tremendous surprise to him, no doubt.'

Impatient as Sir Frederick was to see legal proceedings commenced, he was quite aware of the measured if majestic tread of the law. Burning though he was to break the bonds of his ill-starred union, he knew that it would be a matter of weeks, if not months, before such proceedings began, and so thought he might as well run down to Oaklands and have a little shooting. This, of course, was speedily ascertained by Dickinson, and an advertisement in the recognised channel informed 'M. X. W.' that 'F. was out of town at present.' Anxious and determined though she was to have that interview with her husband, there was consequently no alternative for Sarah but to await his return, and this occasioned a complication in her game that would have driven most women into throwing up the cards. Sarah, however, was gifted not only with audacity but great fertility of invention, and avoided immediate disaster by a piece of daring mendacity. She had hoped to have seen Sir Frederick within two or three days of giving Dickinson his last orders, in which case Sir William would, she hoped, never have learnt of her previous connection with Hallaton, but Mr. Kirk was too prompt in his proceedings, and before that interview could be achieved Sir William was cited in the Divorce Court.

Mr. Kirk had pictured the surprise of the Baronet upon receiving this preliminary notice of proceedings, with an application for the address of his solicitors, but he was destined to be himself astonished in a fashion he had never

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dreamed of. That a stormy scene between husband and wife would be the necessary consequence of the former discovering that the woman he was so proud of was a bigamist would be the natural inference of most people. What happened between Sarah and Sir William may be gathered from what took place between that choleric gentleman and Mr. Kirk, when, unexpectedly, Sir William called to see him.

'Seated, sir. No! I'm not quite in the temper to sit down,' fumed the Baronet, in answer to Mr. Kirk's invitation to take a chair. 'I have come to see you, contrary to the advice of my own solicitors, and if they had not assured me that your name stood high in the profession, I should most assuredly have put you down as an attorney of the Dodson and Fogg pattern—that is, an unmitigated scoundrel.'

'Sir William!' exclaimed the lawyer.

'As it is, you are perhaps merely the tool of one.'

'I cannot hear this language applied to my client,' said Mr. Kirk, rising. 'Your solicitors were quite right, and I must decline to hold any personal communication with you.'

'Don't talk nonsense, sir,' replied the Baronet, hotly. 'I have come here to give somebody a bit of my mind, and as I can't get hold of your rascally client, you will have to hear it. Lady Wrensley fortunately is gifted with pluck, and instead of consenting to be blackmailed by a blackguard, she wisely confessed all to her husband.'

'All,' ejaculated the lawyer, completely nonplussed by the other's tone.

'Yes, all; it was painful, of course, but it was better than having this terrible threat hanging over her. The idea that a woman's fair fame should be at the mercy of such a pitiful cur——'

'Sir William, allow me.'

'No, sir, don't interrupt. You know the code of honour amongst *men* not *Hallatons*. When a woman has perilled her fair fame for a man, he is bound to commit even perjury for her sake. What have you to say for a dastard who takes advantage of the power a woman's weakness has placed in his hands to trade upon it?'

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'Stop, Sir William, trade upon it—blackmail. My client has made no application to you for money I am certain.'

'Not as yet, but what other object can he have in trumping up this infamous charge? He hopes that I will compromise it.'

'How can it be compromised?' asked the lawyer, who by this time had arrived at the conclusion that Lady Wrensley's 'all' had been a very garbled version of the real story; but that, whatever it might be, she had managed to persuade Sir William to believe it.

The Baronet looked at him almost contemptuously for a minute, and then replied, 'When you undertake to do such very dirty work as this, I presume it's the etiquette of your profession to affect complete innocence of the very soiled linen you're washing.'

It was now Mr. Kirk's turn to get angry, and he exclaimed in peremptory tones, 'I will trouble you, Sir William, to leave my office.'

The Baronet took no notice of the remark, but continued: 'Sir Frederick Hallaton, of course, speculates upon my paying him a considerable sum of money to withdraw this charge, and for Lady Wrensley's sake I will.'

'I decline to discuss the subject any further,' was the rejoinder. 'There is no question whatever of money in the matter; while as Sir Frederick's solicitor I may state that he is very well off.'

'More innocence,' sneered the other fiercely; 'as if a young gentleman who passed most of his time on a racecourse was not certain to be in need of money.'

'I'll hear no more,' said Mr. Kirk firmly; 'if you don't leave my office, Sir William, I shall ring and send for a policeman.'

'But you shall hear more, sir,' cried the angry baronet. 'Tell the precious scoundrel you serve that he will be well paid to keep his mouth shut, but that I insist upon his writing a full confession of the lie he has thought fit to utter. In dealing with rascals of his kidney it is as well to hold some security for their future behaviour.'

'Will you go?' said the lawyer angrily, and placing his hand upon the bell.

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'Yes. You shall hear from my solicitors, and I can only express my pity for a man condemned to earn his living in such a dirty fashion as yourself;' and with this parting shot the baronet took his departure just as the bell rang out in sonorous reply to Mr. Kirk's hand.

'Well,' muttered that gentleman as he threw himself back in his chair, 'of all the obstinate, pig-headed, insulting old fools I ever came across I think that's the worst. They say losing your temper is not whist. I know it's not law, and yet it's many a year since I've been so downright angry as I have been this morning. Pooh! the idea of an old solicitor losing his temper—it's too ridiculous. Sir Frederick said I didn't know Lady Hallaton. He's right, she must be a clever woman and stands stoutly to her guns; but what can be the meaning of it? She knows that she is found out, and that we shall have no trouble in proving her first marriage. That done, her position crumbles away at once. She cannot avoid exposure, whatever she may persuade Sir William to do. By the way, I wonder what she has persuaded him to believe. There it is, if I hadn't lost my temper I should have drawn the whole specious story from him. He thinks himself married, that's clear, and he don't believe that Hallaton is. Of course that's it —the artful jade has denied the first marriage and made up a pitiful tale of being betrayed and deserted, and now accuses her betrayer of endeavouring to extort money as the price of his silence concerning the guilty past. Ingenious, but how can it serve. The truth must come out in the law courts, and a woman with half her brains would see that. Unless to gain time to levant, I cannot understand what she's driving at.'

Mr. Kirk overlooked the desperate efforts a woman will make to save her position, even when the saving her reputation is a thing past praying for. To keep the place she had attained in society Sarah was prepared to stick at nothing.

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CHAPTER XL

HUSBAND AND WIFE

Mr. Kirk had accurately guessed the distorted version of the true story which Sarah had given to her husband upon his receiving notice that proceedings were about to be taken against her in the law courts. Sir William, who was infatuated with his wife, was easily induced to take her part warmly. Hallaton was the conventional villain, who, having first betrayed, had then deserted his victim. She blamed herself for not having made full confession of her transgressions before her marriage, but pleaded that in her weariness and loneliness she had not courage to reject the happiness that he offered her. It was only what she deserved—her sin had found her out. She would go away, do whatever he commanded, if only he would forgive the one deceit she had ever practised on him. She ought to have told him all this long ago, but she was only a weak woman sick of battling with the world. Let him but forgive her, and she would go and trouble him no more. It were best so; she had abused an honest man's love and was not fit to live.

A farrago of such fustian, accompanied by tears and sobs, did Sarah pour into Sir William's credulous ears, and the upshot was that the Baronet regarded his wife as a cruelly wronged woman, while of her undoer language failed to express his opinion, albeit he had made a very tolerable endeavour to put it in words during his interview with Mr. Kirk. Still, though Sarah had for the time imposed upon Sir William's credulity, she was painfully aware that there was not an unnecessary day to be lost about seeing her husband. His collaboration was essential in the game she contemplated playing, and it was with a sense of relief that at the end of a week she saw in the second column of the 'Times'—'M. X. W.—F. returned; always at home till noon.' Lady Wrensley's determination was quickly taken. It was then ten, she would call in Grafton Street at half-past eleven.

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She knew that Sir William had heard from his solicitors that, though they could form no opinion as to what sort of a case Mr. Kirk and his partners had against Lady Wrensley, yet they were evidently going on with it; and it was hardly to be supposed that a gentleman of Sir Frederick's position would bring forward such a charge unless he *bonâ fide* sought relief from marriage on the grounds of the lady having deliberately committed bigamy. The Baronet was staggered, but still resolutely refused to believe anything against the woman he had married. His loyalty to the handsome Jezebel who had duped him would have been touching if it had not been also foolish, but Sarah, though fully conscious of her power, knew that if the case was even talked about, the truth must speedily be made manifest, and that even Sir William's eyes would be opened.

Arrived at Grafton Street, Sarah knocked and demanded to see Sir Frederick. The man hesitated for a moment, and muttered that he would see if his master was dressed. Would the lady give him her name? The sole reply was an imperious command to show the lady up, and before the puzzled man could determine what he ought to do, Sarah solved the difficulty by pushing past him and running upstairs. She knew that Sir Frederick occupied the first floor, and making a shot at the door, found herself in a cosily furnished sitting-room where, extended on a sofa near the fire in lazy enjoyment of a newspaper and cigar, was her husband. He took no notice of her entrance for a moment, supposing it to be his valet, but started to his feet as the rustle of her dress caught his ear.

'Sarah!' he ejaculated, in unfeigned astonishment, as he gazed at the handsome and richly dressed woman who stood before him. Quick as thought she noted the glance of admiration with which he paid tribute to her superb beauty. Handsome he had always held her, but he had never recognised how handsome till now. True, he had never seen her attired as she was at present, for Sarah had neither the taste nor the money during the brief period they had passed together, nor had she acquired that veneer of fashionable society which she now possessed. Still his pulse quickened not a beat at the sight of her. He regarded her with the admiration he might have bestowed on a picture or statue that pleased his eye

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'Will you be seated,' he said at length and with studied coldness. 'I am curious to learn to what I owe the honour of this unexpected visit.'

She cast a glance of insolent triumph at him as she complied with his request. She had seen men steel themselves against her fascinations before now in the commencement only to become more completely her slaves than their weaker brethren, and she had his first glance fresh in her mind. 'I have come,' she said in low tones, 'because you once loved me. I have come because I am your wife and need forgiveness.'

'Wife! and you dare to call yourself such still. However, as I am taking steps to relieve you of that obligation —steps you seem to have thought superfluous——'

'I have sinned, but you cannot wish to utterly ruin me. You did love me once, Frederick.'

'A love that was buried before I left England. To free you from the chains that bind us is the kindest thing I can do for you.'

'But the exposure will ruin me, and I really thought you were dead,' she rejoined, raising her handkerchief to her eyes.

A contemptuous glance of disbelief shot across Sir Frederick's face, and it was in sarcastic tones and with a shrug of his shoulders that he replied, 'And that after the manner of a Hindoo widow you were called upon to perform the rite of suttee and die also. I had not given you credit for such devoted attachment.'

The irony of his words stung her, and it was only by a supreme effort she succeeded in controlling her violent temper. She could not yet realise that her influence over her outraged husband was a thing of the past. If in the delirium of passion he had run away with her, no man could more speedily have come to his senses and recognised his mistake. A short love dream was theirs, and the tempestuous scenes in which their honeymoon had terminated had gone far to changing love into hate on his part. Still Sarah would not abandon all attempt to gloss over her misconduct.

'Deserted by you,' she said slowly, and taking no heed of his gesture of dissent, 'I had no choice but to take

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another name. The scandal about my father was too recent, and all the world knew that Mrs. Hallaton was the daughter of a man who had broken the law, and for whom the police were busily seeking. To look for employment in my own name was hopeless. I was compelled to take another; and then I thought you were gone—that I should never see you or hear your voice again,' and then Sarah sank gracefully at her husband's feet in an apparent paroxysm of tears.

He knew that she was lying, and she was quite aware that he did so, but Sarah, like many of us, was determined to represent her sins in the most pardonable light—a woman who would have softened murder to manslaughter and died without acknowledging her guilt however clear the evidence against her. He was lounging with his back against the mantelpiece, and made no attempt to raise her from the abject attitude she had assumed.

'An ingenious fable,' he said at last. 'You were not left destitute or without means, while a line to my lawyers would have assured you of my being alive. Once more—What brought you here?'

She still remained at his feet, and looked such a touching picture of shame and contrition as would have moved most men had they not known what Sir Frederick did, that Sarah's histrionic powers were considerable, and that the whole scene was a bit of acting mentally rehearsed beforehand.

'For the love you once bore me you will spare me the disgrace of going through the law courts,' she said, looking piteously up into his face.

'I intend to free myself from you at all costs,' he replied sternly. 'I would rather our domestic differences were not public property, nor do I desire to brand you as a bigamist, but there is no help for it.'

'Yes, yes, there is,' she exclaimed, springing to her feet, and speaking eagerly. 'Sir William believes he is married to me. I want nothing from you. I will never ask you for help or assistance of any kind. I will never willingly cross your path again. Grant me this last favour. Deny our marriage.'

'As if that would invalidate it,' he replied.

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'Ah, but who knows where we were married? Let us only both deny it, and who is likely to ferret out the registry office where it was performed; who can have any object in it? I will sign any paper you choose saying that I was never married to you, and that I have no claim on you whatever. Let your lawyers draw it up. Make it as binding as you like—I will sign it. No one need know but our two selves.'

'Kirk was right,' he muttered; then, raising his voice, he continued, 'You dare to think that I will endorse the stupendous lie that you have told Wrensley. Do you know that you have made him believe that the proceedings I am taking to rid myself of a worthless woman are only a pretext to extort money? He must be mad about you indeed to think that—must deem me the meanest cur that crawls; and you—you ask me to assure him that it is so—to bear witness to my own dishonour.'

'I ask you to spare me,' she murmured, at once recognising the terrible mistake she had made in hinting that mercenary motives were the reason for what she termed her persecution.

'Spare you,' he rejoined fiercely. You ask me to sacrifice all men hold dear, and for what? To save the reputation of a woman who has forfeited all claim to mercy. You have put it in my power, and I shall rid myself of you at all costs.'

'I understand,' she replied defiantly. 'You want to marry that white-faced girl at Exmouth.'

'What has that to do with you?' he asked roughly.

'A good deal if it is so. She has been prudishly brought up, and might hesitate to take a divorced husband.'

'You will be good enough to leave that lady's name alone. Further conversation is useless. Nothing you can say will make any difference. The law will sunder us, and you will be free to go your own way.'

'Free,' she cried. 'Yes, and branded as an outcast from all I hold dear. Listen, you have not heard perhaps that old Lydney has failed—failed because, years ago, some securities were stolen.'

'I know all about that,' he interposed. 'You need not repeat that some old friends of mine have come to grief.'

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'Yes, but you don't know where those securities are, nor that it is possible to restore them.'

'No; as I heard it, they were lost years and years ago, and no trace of them has ever been discovered,' rejoined Sir Frederick, with evidently aroused interest.

'It is as I guessed,' thought Sarah, quick to note the impression she had made. 'Now, if no rubbish about his honour interferes, I can drive a satisfactory bargain with him.

'What would you give to the person who placed them in your hands?' she asked, eyeing him keenly.

'I could not say without communicating with Mr. Lydney; but this rest assured, that the present possessor of those securities will get more from him than from anyone else. They are worth more to him than money; to produce them would be to vindicate his good name and justify his story.'

The flush of exultation that crossed Sarah's face told Sir Frederick he had made a slight blunder. By admitting their importance he had enhanced the value of these securities, and the price demanded for their restoration would be, of course, raised in proportion.

'You speak cautiously,' she said; 'not as if the vindication of Mr. Lydney's good name was of much object to you. And yet it should be.'

'We had better confine ourselves to the securities,' replied Sir Frederick coldly. 'I don't suppose I am dealing with a principal, and have no wish to ask questions. Say at once what sum is asked, and you shall have an answer in three days.'

'Money won't buy them,' she rejoined. 'Accede to my terms, and they are yours if I can get them. Money! What do I want with money. I have plenty.'

'There is no more to be said,' he exclaimed angrily. 'Life itself may be purchased on terms too degrading. I will never endorse the lie you have uttered, nor rest till I have freed myself from your shameless self.'

'Then you shall never marry Mary Lydney. She shall know that it was in your power to clear her father's name and you refused. Do what I ask and you shall be free. Never fear that I shall ever claim or acknowledge you as a husband. We were never married, you understand.'

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He stood for a minute or two looking silently at this woman, prepared to shrink from nothing that might save her from exposure, and wondered what fate would have been his had he been at her mercy. She watched him eagerly. She knew that unless she could purchase his connivance she would stand forth in her true character of an utterly unscrupulous adventuress. In her eyes it seemed such a little thing to forget that mistaken marriage, and go their respective ways as if it had never been. How could he hesitate? Who would ever know anything about it if they themselves ignored it? What harm could there be in an innocent lie like that should the question ever be raised?

'And you think,' said he at last, 'I'm blackguard enough to place a woman in your present position? Not quite. My future you have nothing to do with, as the law will speedily convince you. One thing more. Go abroad while there is yet time. Bigamy, remember, entails unpleasant consequences.'

It was over; she had played her last card and lost. It was all finished now, and the fruits of two years' scheming and intriguing would vanish in a few weeks. Still, Sarah was defiant to the last.

'I give you three days to consider,' she said. 'After that it will be too late, and you will have sacrificed the good name of those whom you profess to love for a foolish punctilio.' And with a slight bend of her head Sarah swept out of the room.

'No, punctilios certainly don't trouble her,' thought Hallaton. 'She must be morally blind and destitute of any sense of honour ever to have dreamt of making such a proposal. I wonder whether she has any knowledge of the whereabouts of those securities? I can't see how it's possible, and she is such an unmitigated liar that there is no dependence to be placed on what she says. I must have a talk with Lydney about it.'

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CHAPTER XLI

SARAH LEVANTS

When she left Grafton Street, bold front as she had maintained to the last, Sarah knew that the struggle was over, that the battle had gone against her, and it behoved her to prepare for that flight which her brother, her husband, and even the detective, had all counselled. A few weeks and her fine feathers would be stripped from her, and she would be proclaimed in open Court to be no longer the fashionable Lady Wrensley, one of Society's queens, but Sarah Mercer, daughter of a fraudulent publican, an adventuress, a bigamist, and a divorcée. She would wait the three days she had named, on the off-chance that Hallaton might relent; but she knew that it was useless—that he was burning to be rid of her. He had never loved her, and was mad to marry that white-faced girl at Exmouth. In her wrath she had threatened that wedding should never be, but in her heart she knew that she had no power to prevent it. Why had Sir Frederick ever inquired into the truth of her decease? He might not perhaps if it had not been for that girl down in Devonshire. Why had she been such a fool as to be photographed? Her vanity had got the better of her prudence, and now she must pay the penalty. She was learning

> What a tangled web we weave,
> When first we practise to deceive.

It would be well if all schemers and intriguers could lay to heart that golden aphorism of Junius before embarking on their nefarious plots: 'The language of truth is uniform and consistent, to depart from it with safety requires *memory* and *discretion*.' Indeed, to proclaim a big lie requires so much of those two qualities that it is to be wondered so many people have the courage to utter one.

It is hard to say how these things come about; but since the days of King Midas it has been ever so, and although, as was natural, it had not yet reached Sarah's

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ears, already in Club-land it was whispered that there was a screw loose about the Wrensley menage. Solicitors may be silent as the grave about their clients' affairs, but the initial steps of legal proceedings are necessarily known to a good many people, and the germs of what promises to be a *cause célèbre* fructify amazingly as the toothsome scandal spreads from the Temple to Pall Mall. Rumour in the latter locality declared that there had been "no end of a row" in Tyburnia, and that Sir William was about to commence proceedings in the Divorce Court, and the quidnuncs of St. James' were much exercised as to who was the partner of Lady Wrensley's transgression. Still, though gossip was busy with Sarah's name, yet that of her fellow-offender puzzled Club smoking-rooms exceedingly. She had borne the character of a universal coquette, and the world had considered her flirtations too numerous to be compromising.

'Lady Wrensley can take care of herself,' had been the verdict of a veteran cynic in Sarah's first season. 'She would flirt with an ourang-outang to gratify her own vanity, to wound that of one of her dear friends, or to attain her ends; but she hasn't a heart to lose, and is too much in love with Lady Wrensley to run any risk of falling in love with any one else.'

So far old Audley South had proved a true prophet, and Sarah changed her admirers almost as often as she changed her gloves. Was it not Mazarin who said till thirty no one sways such power as a pretty woman, and in the insolence of her beauty Lady Wrensley had dropped or taken up her cavaliers as whim or self-interest dictated. Her husband had apparently been indifferent to her caprices so far, but now it seemed some one had 'given that worthy man, Sir William, cause for much uneasiness,' and as South said, 'Who the devil is it?' The old gossip was really quite put out at not being able to answer this question. He piqued himself upon being always behind the scenes and posted in all the details of the latest scandal, be it what it might; and here was a very famous divorce case looming in the future, and the name of the male culprit by no means to be come at. Jocular youngsters made the veteran's life bitter to him by maliciously

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appealing to him for the patronymic of Lady Wrensley's lover as a fact that he was, of course, in possession of, and it was most exasperating to have to acknowledge his ignorance to these inquiring young men.

Sarah had lately noticed that her husband's face had assumed a very serious aspect. The fact was that, devoted as he was to his wife, his faith in her had been shaken. Since his interview with Mr. Kirk, his solicitors had assured him that, as far as they could judge, the threatened action for divorce against Lady Hammerton, *alias* Wrensley, was a very *bonâ fide* affair indeed. He had indulged in strong language, opined, after his manner when people differed from him, that lawyers were a pack of 'adjectived' fools, but for all that he began to have his misgivings. His solicitors further said that, in compliance with his instructions, they had sounded the adversary to see if a compromise was feasible, but that they felt convinced that no pecuniary offer would be entertained, and that the plaintiff sought relief from his marriage and nothing more. If this was the case, then Sarah's story could hardly be correct. Hallaton would certainly not bring such an action unless he believed himself married. Add to which, inquiry had, rather to his surprise, taught Sir William that Hallaton, far from being the needy, unprincipled man that Sarah had depicted him, bore a very good record, and that, barring he had made a very imprudent marriage a few years ago, there was nothing against him. Pursuing the inquiry further, Sir William was not long before he unearthed an old chum who recollected the story of Hallaton's fiasco.

'Remember something about it now—young fellow in the Artillery—ran away with an innkeeper's daughter down near Exeter. Father had to bolt directly afterwards for running an illicit still. Devil of a mess the young 'un made of it. His uncle, old Bob Hallaton—nice little property in Kent, you know—so mad about it, swore he'd cut him off with a shilling, and had an apoplectic fit trying to sign his name—doosid lucky thing for the young fellow. He disappeared next to Australia, or India, or some other place or other.'

'And his wife, what of her?' asked Sir William.

'I'm sure I don't know. Poor old Bob! ever come

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across him? Played the worst rubber of any man in London, and by the Lord, sir, that's saying a good deal.'

As Sir William walked ruefully home he reflected that he never had known his wife's maiden name, that she seemed to have borne a good many, and that there might be more 'adjective' fools about than lawyers.

Two out of the three days that Sarah had allowed herself were gone, and she was busy completing her preparations for flight when a letter was put into her hand which at once convinced her that there was indeed no time to be lost. The letter was from Sam, and had been brought by hand; indeed the bookmaker had left it himself after ascertaining that Lady Wrensley was in. It was brief, and ran thus:—

'The enclosed cutting is from the "Exmouth Gazette," which was sent me by Dr. Nicholl. Once more I say *slope* before it's too late. If you want any dollars write to me. —SAM.'

Sarah glanced eagerly at the newspaper paragraph, and as she read saw that her story would be inevitably all over London before twenty-four hours were over, might indeed be in that evening's papers. She knew from her previous experience how such a paragraph as the following would run the round of the journals. It would be copied everywhere.

'REMARKABLE LIKENESS.—Many of our readers will remember the romantic elopement of a young officer of the artillery, some three years ago, with the daughter of a publican near Exmouth, a young lady well-known for her great personal attractions. Mr. Type, the enterprising stationer in Rolle Street, amongst a consignment of fancy goods, lately had a large assortment of photographs sent him. Amongst them was one of the beautiful Lady Wrensley. Those in Exmouth who recollect Miss Mercer declare that she was the very image of the fashionable London beauty; and one of our most notable citizens, who knew Miss Mercer intimately, had quite angry words with Mr. Type for persistently maintaining that the photograph in his window was Lady Wrensley. Mr. Type is a new comer amongst us, and therefore we would sooner accept the verdict of Mr. Tootell and believe that the photograph

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is really that of Lady Hallaton *née* Mercer, and that the name beneath it was pencilled by mistake. If not, we can only say there are two feminine Dromios in the world at present, and an exceedingly handsome pair they are. We have excellent authority for saying that the rumour lately current of Lady Hallaton's death is without foundation.'

Sarah's brow darkened as she finished. 'That wretched old busybody, one might be sure of his making mischief. However, it matters little, as well now as a few days hence. Frederick's pig-headed obstinacy has ruined me.'

That night Sir William had to make his wife's excuses for not attending a dinner party to which they had been for some time engaged. Lady Wrensley had unfortunately one of those terrible headaches to which she was subject, and he had been compelled to leave her behind. Such was the message Sarah's maid had brought him at the last moment. She had declined to see him, and begged that she might not be disturbed, adding that it was her intention to go at once to bed. In all his experience of her it was the first time that Lady Wrensley had been thus afflicted. Sir William was in little mood for society, and if he had consulted his own inclinations would have dined by himself; but the social treadmill must be trod whatever spirits we may be in. So Sir William went, eat, drank, and if he did not make merry made as good a pretence of doing so as he could contrive. When he returned to his own home a little before midnight he found a note awaiting him on his study table. He recognised his wife's handwriting and felt at once that the impending shock had come at last, and that his wife's confession was in his hand. He was, as we know, not altogether unprepared for this, but the first line of the letter did surprise him.

'When you receive this,' she wrote, 'I shall be gone. I will not stop to be the talk of the town. I cannot face the cruel ordeal of a witness-box, nor bear the hectoring of lawyers. I have stooped to see Hallaton myself, but he is relentless; he refuses to abandon legal proceedings.' Then came several lines of high-strung penitence for having deceived him in the first instance, with a repetition of the former farrago of not having courage to dash the cup of happiness from her lips, finally winding up with a pathetic

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trust that they should meet in happier times, and signing herself 'Your Loving Wife.'

Convinced though she was that the game was up, yet Sarah could not bring herself to make a frank confession. She stuck to the embroidered version she had previously given, although Sir William must at once recognise the fraud of which she had been guilty. If she were not married to Sir Frederick, what had she got to be afraid of? Her very flight was tacit admission of the truth of the charge, and a natural step for her to take under the circumstances. Although the servants were as yet unaware of it, inquiry speedily elicited the fact that Lady Wrensley had fled. She had announced her intention of going to bed about nine, and given strict orders that she was not to be disturbed until the morning, and had then probably let herself out of the house while the servants were at supper. Be that as it may, there was no doubt about the fact that Lady Wrensley had disappeared.

As she had anticipated, the paragraph from the Exmouth paper was widely copied, and the cause of much comment among the clubs of Pall Mall. Audley South, indeed, was driven to the very verge of desperation by this new phase of what he angrily termed 'the Wrensley mystery.' Here she was about to appear in the Divorce Court, and now it seemed doubtful whether she was Lady Wrensley at all! Who the deuce was she? Was she Lady Hallaton, or was she Lady Wrensley? 'Is she neither, or both? 'Pon my word, it's like a double acrostic, and I give it up!' And then, to complete the old *gôbe-mouche's* discomfiture, came the news that Lady Wrensley had fled the country, and once more arose that unsolvable question: Who was the partner of her flight?

No man, perhaps, was more interested in the Wrensley case than our old friend Dicky Chives. It may seem strange that Dicky had not recognised Sarah, but it must be borne in mind that he was not a society man for one thing and so had not met with Lady Wrensley; secondly, that though he had seen Miss Mercer, it had only been upon some two or three occasions, and he had brought away from Devonshire no very distinct remembrance of the pretty girl he had seen on Exmouth cricket ground, while, veiled as she had been

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that night at the railway station, Dicky would certainly not have known who it was had he not been told by the Doctor; and though he had more than once seen Lady Wrensley's photograph in the shop windows, it had merely awakened a hazy idea in his mind that he must have met her on some former occasion. Captain Chives at this present was on his way down to Oaklands, with a view to assisting in the destruction of some of Hallaton's partridges, and fortifying himself for the remainder of his journey with a comfortable lunch at the United Flags.

CHAPTER XLII

JOE MERCER REFUSES TO SPEAK

THE paragraph quoted from the Exmouth paper puzzled Chives amazingly. He had believed Lady Hallaton to be dead, and yet if there was any truth in this story that could hardly be the case. At all events, there was little doubt that Hallaton would see the report, and surely would speak of it during his visit. 'If not,' thought Dicky, 'I will just ask him if he has seen it. Considering what a queer marriage it was, and I believe a most unhappy one, it is rather a delicate subject to touch on. Still, I think I may go that length, and then it will be for him to continue the subject. Master Fred is not the fellow to stand much cross-questioning on a subject he don't wish to talk about, and whether she is living or not, they were on those terms that would make all reference to her painful. Now it's pointed out to me I do vaguely seem to recollect that Miss Mercer was rather like those photographs.'

Hallaton met him at the station, and as they clasped hands said, 'You'll find me all alone, Dicky, but I've got two more fellows coming to-morrow evening, so that we shall be just four guns and a rubber in the evening. What I call the perfection of a bachelor shooting party. I thought to-night you and I could have a long talk over old times, and to-morrow I've got to show you the house and grounds,

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and so on, you know, but don't think I'm playing it low on you. I've lots of birds, aud they've hardly been touched yet.

Dicky laughed as he rejoined, 'Oh, you and I, with the assistance of a "roofer," the *Racing Calendar*, and old memories, can always get through an intellectual evening.' As for the little brown cusses there'll be plenty of time to knock them about. The turnips are high, and, the Lord be praised, there have been no early frosts to speak of,' concluded Captain Chives piously.

That night in the smoking-room, when the talk had grown confidential, as it is wont to do, between two old chums over the evening tobacco, Chives at length asked if Hallaton had seen 'this paragraph in the papers about himself.'

'I don't want to ask questions, old man, although I own I am fairly puzzled; but as this thing concerns you, you certainly ought to see it, if you haven't already done so.'

Hallaton took the paper, and glanced over it. 'No,' he said, 'I missed this somehow yesterday. You may as well know at once what all the world will know shortly. There's not much marvel about the likeness, Dicky; they're the same woman. Lady Hallaton's death was a fiction. On the contrary, while I was abroad she married Wrensley. I honestly believed her dead when I told you it was the case. As it is, I trust to be a free man again as soon as the law can make me so. Now, please, we'll dismiss the subject. It's not one, as you may guess, that I care to talk upon.'

They smoked on for some minutes in silence, and then Hallaton said, 'it's an odd thing; but, as you know, what brought old Lydney to grief was mainly the loss of a lot of securities which had been deposited with him. They were supposed to be stolen some years ago.'

'I know the whole story,' said Chives.

'Well, I've had one interview with Lady Hallaton since my return. It wasn't exactly a peaceful one, I can tell you. She's a hot-tempered woman, and in her wrath she declared she knew where those securities were, and could recover them if she liked. Now, I'm inclined to think that she spoke the truth, but I'm equally convinced nothing

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would induce her to tell me anything with regard to their whereabouts; but it strikes me that her father must know also, and I think it likely that he might be induced to listen to reason if one could only get at him.'

'Nothing easier,' rejoined Chives. 'For once you've consulted the right man. I believe the old fellow to be working a betting office in Boulogne, laying fabulous prices about treble events and all that sort of thing, but Sam Mercer the bookmaker is rather a pal of mine. I did him a good turn some while ago at Newmarket. I and the Doctor happened to chip in and save him from being robbed, and he has never forgotten it. Through him I've no doubt we could get at old Mercer.'

'That will do,' said Hallaton. 'The old man was always keen to turn a penny, and for a consideration, I fancy, would part with the papers if he had them, or at all events tell us what he knows about them.'

'Can but try,' said Chives; 'but, by Jove, from all I heard at the time, if anybody could restore those papers to Lydney he'd be doing him a wonderful turn.'

Chives said no more; in his heart of hearts he did not think there was the remotest chance of anything coming of it. The securities had been lost years ago, and the sole grounds for even supposing they were still in existence was the word of an angry woman. A woman in a temper, or for the matter of that a man either, is reckless of speech and likely to say a good deal more than he means or can substantiate. However, there could be no harm in his writing to Sam Mercer, and that having been determined on the pair separated for the night.

The bookmaker was accordingly communicated with the next day, and Hallaton awaited somewhat anxiously what the reply might be. It came in due coure. Sam replied that he of course knew all particulars of Mr. Lydney's failure, that the robbery was committed before he was born, that he knew nothing about it and could not imagine that his father did either, but he had written to ask him. Before the termination of Chives' visit another letter was received from the bookmaker, in which he said that his father remembered the robbery perfectly, that he had seen the securities not very long ago, but they were not in his possession.

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'I tell you what, old man,' said Chives, as he handed the letter across to Hallaton, 'we're not on a wild goose chase after all.'

'No,' replied the latter, 'this pretty well confirms what I suspected, that the deeds are still in existence, and that Mr. Mercer, senior, knows where they are. You notice he only says they are not in his possession. Now, I suppose there's only one way to speak to him, and that's to ask him how much he wants to open his mouth.'

'Let's think it over a bit,' replied Chives. 'You're right, I'll lay odds. All we've got is to consider how best to get at him.'

'I've thought of all that,' said Hallaton. 'Situated as I am I don't think it would be very politic for me to make advances. You see the old man thinks no end of his daughter. He is sure to take her part when he finds we are about to separate. When you go back, if you would see Sam Mercer on your way through town I think you might come to an arrangement with him, keeping my name well in the background.'

Chives considered for a minute or two, and then said, 'All right; I'll do the best I can, but remember, if the old man thinks a lot of his daughter, Sam is exceedingly fond of his sister. Still, this is nothing to do with you that I can see. It's a matter of restitution to Lydney. There'll be no need to mention you in the matter, which, luckily, I have not done so far.'

The artilleryman's visit came to an end, and as he wished his host good-bye at the station he said,

'Thanks, old man, for a very pleasant visit, and I think we may fairly claim to have given the partridges a dusting. I'll see about your business to-morrow, and let you know as soon as I've seen Sam Mercer.'

Some two or three days afterwards Chives wrote to report the result of his embassy, and Hallaton was not a little disappointed at the result. Dicky said that he had met with no difficulty with Sam. The bookmaker was honestly desirous to help Mr. Lydney if he could. 'The trouble,' wrote Chives, 'is with old Mr. Mercer. He makes no bones about it. The deeds are all right, and though he has not got them, he knows where they are. It isn't a

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question of money. The old man says the secret is not his, and that he will have no more to do with it; it has cost him dear enough as it is. It's hard upon him to end his days in a foreign land, from all of which Sam Mercer says we may infer the old 'un don't take kindly to French wines and cookery. But what the deuce these papers had to do with his setting up a private distillery he can't guess.'

Hallaton had been too sanguine; it had not occurred to him that Chives would fail in his mission, and now things were apparently at a deadlock. If Joe Mercer was not to be made to speak, then all clue was lost. He had no idea in what direction to continue his inquiries. Then he thought the sooner he went down to Exmouth the better. He had hoped to have taken those securities down with him, but as that was not to be the sooner the unexpected discovery of Lady Hallaton and his present position was explained, the better. That paragraph, too, had doubtless been seen by the Lydneys, who would probably draw the same inference that Chives had done, to wit, that his wife was still alive. What would Mary think of it? He had told her he was free, and if rumour was to be trusted, he had lied; it was no time for writing now; if an explanation was to be made by letter it should have been done long since. No, he must go down to Exmouth himself, and tell his story in person. Another thing, too, the banker ought to be told that those securities were still in existence and that Mercer knew of their whereabouts. It was possible that Mr. Lydney might see his way to following up the clue, which Hallaton was fain to confess was beyond him. The sooner he was off the better, it could not be very long now before Hallaton *versus* Hallaton figured in the papers, and it was as well the Lydney's should hear the story from his own lips before that happened.

Having put up at his old quarters at The Beacon, Hallaton speedily sallied forth to call upon the banker. He determined to ask for Mr. Lydney in the first instance, and tell him his story before asking to see Mary. The banker received him with marked coldness. He had been not a little puzzled by that paragraph in the local paper. If he had not had Sir Frederick's assurance that his wife was dead, from his own lips, he would never have supposed it,

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but jealous as he had grown of his fellows' bearing towards him, prone as he was to take offence at an imaginary insult, yet on this occasion he had been far more forbearing than his daughter. He had rather pooh-poohed the paragraph altogether, said 'If you believed all you saw in the papers you would fall into no end of mistakes, that this was only a mare's nest of that old fool Tootell's finding;' but Mary had declined to discuss the question, saying, 'We'll not talk of it, father; if Frederick made any mistake in what he told me I must bear it as best I can, but I'll take care that there shall be no mistakes in future.'

Mr. Lydney did not pursue the subject, for, gentle though she was, he knew his daughter could be very determined on a point like this. He listened with considerable dismay to Sir Frederick's statement. He had no doubt of the baronet's good faith, but he had so made up his mind that this newspaper report was all rubbish, it was a sore disappointment to find how much truth there was in it. Then, no man cares to see his proposed son-in-law figure in such a *cause célèbre* as Hallaton's case was likely to be.

'No, Sir Frederick,' he said, in answer to the young man's request to see Miss Lydney. 'I don't think Mary would see you if she was aware of your story; at all events, I don't wish her to do so until this business is over. You must see, yourself, that it's impossible.'

'I bow to your decision,' replied the Baronet, 'but this miserable business once finished with, I demand to hear my fate from Mary's own lips. Now I've one thing more to tell you. Everyone knows that your misfortunes were brought about through being robbed of a lot of valuable securities. Those securities are still existing, and their whereabouts is known to old Joe Mercer.'

'What!' exclaimed the banker, 'the man who kept the old Dragon Inn, the man whose daughter——' And here Mr. Lydney stopped abruptly as Hallaton nodded assent. 'Good God, you don't say so!' he continued, 'to recover those would set me straight before the world. Where is old Mercer? I know him well. He used to bank with me; indeed, he had a balance in my hands when the bank stopped payment.'

'I don't know whether you can do anything with him,'

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replied Sir Frederick; 'he is living at present in Boulogne. He says he knows where those missing papers are, but that it is not his secret, and he declines to say more. I hoped perhaps that this alone would give you some clue.'

'I must think—I must think,' rejoined Mr. Lydney, evidently much excited. 'Yes—yes, he ran away just about the time I was so ill. I remember, I bought all his tables, but my head was so confused. Who was it told me to buy those tables? Go, go! I must talk to Mary about all this. She will know better than I do what took place. You won't leave Exmouth till you've seen me again. Yes, yes; I must talk to Mary.'

Sir Frederick rose and took his leave, but he was so struck by Mr. Lydney's excitement that he told the servant who let him out she had better let Miss Lydney know that her father wanted her at once, and as he walked away the Baronet could not refrain from thinking that Mr. Lydney was a little off his head on the subject of those papers.

'Dare say I've put my foot in it,' he muttered. 'I never ought to have alluded to the subject. Cracked on it, no doubt.'

CHAPTER XLIII.

'I SHOULD SEND FOR TOOTELL.'

MARY was seriously frightened at the condition in which she found her father. Since the day Mr. Abrams had called, and endeavoured to buy the tables, she had not seen him in such a state of excitement. Dr. Meadows had warned her that all allusion to the events just preceding his illness ought to be strictly avoided. She had been very careful not to recur to them herself, more especially after witnessing the results of Mr. Abrams' visit. Now, it was evident that Sir Frederick must have touched upon the forbidden topics, and the effect upon Mr. Lydney was most unfortunate. He was very agitated, and would talk about nothing but the lost securities. She had done wrong to sell those tables. Was she certain they had been

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thoroughly searched? If only he hadn't broken down. Then he alluded to the confession, and the pig-headed obstinacy of the chaplain, who had declined to show it to anyone, but said that he should deliver it to the person to whom it was addressed, as soon as he could discover his whereabouts. This was the first that Mary had heard of the confession, and when she ventured to ask him who that person was, her father replied that the chaplain had refused to tell them even that. In vain, after a time, Mary sought to turn the conversation. It was useless, her father would talk of nothing else, and became irritable in the extreme when she endeavoured by her monosyllabic replies to put an end to all talk between them. In the course of the afternoon, Miss Lydney sent a message to Dr. Meadows, asking him to look in; and the doctor emphatically reiterated his former orders.

It was some time, however, before Mr. Lydney could be pacified, and it was not until he had rummaged through his despatch-box, found the letter from the Ditchwood doctor, and handed it over to his daughter, that he was prevailed upon to drop the subject; but one thing he insisted upon, that he should see Sir Frederick again before he left Exmouth. Whatever had taken place between them, Mary could have no doubt it was some allusion of Hallaton's that had recalled the memories of the old trouble. Mr. Lydney in his excitement had omitted to make any mention of Joe Mercer, but had confined himself strictly to the hiding-place of the missing papers. The whole story had a singular fascination for Mary, to say nothing of the great importance it might be. Her father had given her to understand that it would make a great pecuniary difference to them; but, far above that, it would clear his name to all the world, and convince his enemies that, though unfortunate, he had never been dishonourable. She did not know what to do. She wanted someone to advise her. If it had not been for that unfortunate paragraph, she would naturally have summoned Fred Hallaton to her side. Mr. Lydney, after the manner of a man intensely preoccupied with his own affairs, had utterly forgotten hers. He had volunteered no account of Hallaton's explanation. He would talk about nothing but the lost papers. She was

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still in ignorance of whether it was true that Lady Hallaton was alive or not. What she ought to do perplexed Mary much. It was quite clear that her father would not be well enough to see Sir Frederick, while, under the circumstances, it was rather awkward to ask him to call upon herself. Still he must be in possession of some information which it behoved her to know, or else what could he have said that had so thoroughly upset her father? She could not think what steps to take even now, and certainly ought not to neglect any chance of procuring further knowledge on the subject, be it ever such a scrap. Mary Lydney, indeed, had plenty to trouble her just now. She was anxious about her father's health, and equally so not to throw away a chance of solving the riddle of the securities, if that were possible. Worried by these thoughts, she went into her boudoir, and, for the hundredth time, opened and carefully examined the two tables. No, she could see no trace of a spring or anything to indicate that there was a secret drawer or compartment in either of them. There was only one thing for it; she must see Sir Frederick herself. She would write to him a formal note, asking him to call upon her, and give him clearly to understand that it was solely upon a matter of business. His advice obtained, and that interview over, then she must act for herself. She had never doubted that that paragraph was true all along; and had it not been, her father would surely have mentioned it. So she sat down and wrote a formal little note, in which Miss Lydney presented her compliments, and all was penned as if they had barely the pleasure of each other's acquaintance.

If Fred Hallaton was not very well pleased upon receiving this note, it would be useless to say that he was not prepared for it. He had hardly hoped to have seen Mary at all, but he quite understood that their interview was to be formal, and strictly confined to business, though what that business could be puzzled him not a little. In his anxiety about his love affair with Mary Lydney he for the time forgot the interests of her father. When the banker had said he must see him again before he left the town he imagined it would be in reference to his engagement with Mary, and now puzzled his brains as to whether

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Mary's deciding to see him herself was a good or an evil omen. Upon the whole he thought the former. If she were wholly inexorable she would have avoided a farewell. Lovers' mistakes so often right themselves during these assumed final partings. He, of course, sent a line in reply, saying that he would do himself the honour, &c., of calling the next day at the hour named, in short, worded punctiliously after the manner of her own missive.

Miss Lydney received him at the time appointed in her own boudoir, and from the ceremonious, though graceful bow, with which she greeted him, Hallaton saw that he was expected to keep strictly within the prescribed limits.

'I have asked you to call, Sir Frederick, because I want to ask your advice for one thing, and secondly, to learn from yourself what knowledge you have about a matter of the greatest importance to us. My father's health must be my excuse for troubling you. He gets so dreadfully excited on the subject that Dr. Meadows has forbidden all conversation about it before him.'

Her tones had been somewhat unsteady at starting, but his quiet conventional manner reassured her, and they were steady enough by this.

'You are aware that our misfortunes are all owing to the loss of some securities a long while ago. Let me tell you the whole story,' and forthwith Mary commenced to relate the history of the lost papers as far as she knew it. She told him how nothing had been heard of them for years—how that the robbery was attributed to a young member of the family, but what relative she did not know, who had rooms in the Bank, disappeared at the time, and had never been heard of since. Then she showed him the remarkable letter that her father had received from the Ditchwood doctor; how, in consequence of that letter, her father at the sale at the Old Dragon had bought all the tables put up with one exception, but how, though they had been carefully searched, nothing had been found. How her father, with the germs of fever on him, had then hurried off to the bedside of, he supposed, this long-missing relative, only to find it tenanted by the dead body of a notorious burglar well-known to the police. The man had died in

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consequence of injuries received in a railway accident, and he it was who through the doctor had sent the message concerning the whereabouts of the lost papers. The man, too, had further made a long statement which the chaplain had taken down in writing, but that gentleman said that the paper was not addressed to Mr. Lydney, and declined to communicate its contents to anyone, saying that he did not consider himself justified in doing so, and that he should only surrender the paper into the hands of the person to whom it was addressed, and who that person was he declined to say. 'Worry and travelling, when he was utterly unfitted for it, threw my father,' continued Miss Lydney, 'into a violent fever, from the effects of which he has never really recovered. He was delirious part of the time, but it was long before he was fit to attend to business; add to which the clue seemed totally lost, the tables had been vainly searched by himself, and during his illness I disposed of most of them, but I have kept those two,' and she pointed to the pair that stood in the room.

'It's a most extraordinary story,' said Hallaton, now deeply interested.

'Still more so, you will say, when you hear what I am now going to tell you. Singularly enough, during the last few weeks, we have had two men endeavouring to purchase those tables. One was Abrams, a Jew furniture broker, who exasperated my father much by his persistence; the other one, Mr. Tootell, an inquisitive busybody, well known in the town.'

'I know him,' interposed Hallaton briefly.

'Now, though it was curious that Mr. Abrams should wish to buy the tables, still they're all in his line; but why Mr. Tootell should be anxious to purchase them I can't conceive. Can you suggest any explanation of the mystery? Can you tell me if there is anything to be done, and what?'

'It's a most extraordinary case,' repeated Hallaton, 'and the news I've brought to Mr. Lydney makes it, if anything, still more so. Mercer, the man who formerly kept the Dragon Inn—and Sir Frederick winced a little as he alluded to his disreputable father-in-law—'states that the papers are in existence, and that he knows

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in whose possession they are, but he says it's not his secret; and nothing will induce him to say anything more.'

'It is always the same,' said Mary, with a weary sigh; 'we seem to be on the verge of finding them, and then seem further off their discovery than ever.'

'Let me think for a few minutes,' said Hallaton as Mary paused. 'Let us see, as far as the evidence goes, it amounts to this—the burglar message told Mr. Lydney that the securities were in a table at the Dragon; the landlord of that inn declares that he has seen them and knows where they are. Now, if they were in a table-drawer they must have been discovered at the time of the sale; you know how people pull furniture about and look it over at an auction. It is not likely that all the drawers were not pulled out and looked into half a dozen times by possible buyers; therefore, supposing Mr. Creasy and Mercer both to have been correct in their statements, the papers must have been removed when the latter fled from the old inn.'

'Then what do you advise?' asked Miss Lydney. 'It seems that unless Mr. Mercer chooses to speak we can do nothing.'

During all this time Sir Frederick had been regarding the tables with considerable interest. He now rose from his chair and walking across examined both tables carefully. Then turning round, he said quietly, 'I should send for Tootell.'

'Mr. Tootell!' cried Mary in astonishment.

'Yes,' replied Hallaton, 'I think that is the first thing to be done. It is possible that there may be some secret drawers to these tables, which have escaped your scrutiny; at all events it would be something to ascertain why Mr. Tootell is so anxious to become their possessor. Though an inquisitive bore, he's a good-natured old fellow at bottom.'

Now, although this might be good advice, Mary Lydney was conscious that it was calculated to become a little embarrassing. Some short time must elapse before a servant could return either with Mr. Tootell or without him, and this interval, Mary felt, would be particularly awkward. What were they to talk about? The last time they had met

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they had been as good as pledged to one another, and now they must talk platitudes. However, Mary determined to brave it, and rang the bell to give instructions that Mr. Tootell should be if possible found, and brought there as quickly as might be.

A dead silence came between them, after the servant's departure. Mary got so nervous at the awkwardness of the situation that she felt that she could bear it no longer, and muttering something about going to look after her father, 'requested Sir Frederick to excuse her.' He rose to open the door for her, but pausing for one moment with his hand on the lock, said, 'Miss Lydney, I have no right to speak to you now, and can only implore you to believe that I was in complete ignorance of all the circumstances when we last met, and that what I ventured then to say was spoken in all honesty and sincerity.'

She made no reply, but as she passed through the door gave him a glance which showed that, though they might never be more to each other than they were then, she believed that he had sinned against her unwittingly.

Nearly half an hour elapsed before Mr. Tootell made his appearance, during which time Hallaton occupied himself in measuring the tables with his walking-stick in various ways, and in tapping them with his knuckles, to see if he could discover any traces of concealed drawers, and was so engaged when Tootell entered the room.

He started when he saw what Hallaton was doing. Unintentionally the baronet had hit upon the very best way of opening the business. Mr. Tootell had made a pretty fair guess as to why he had been sent for, and directly he saw what Sir Frederick was about he knew that he, at all events, suspected the existence of a secret drawer, and under these circumstances it was not likely that the tables would be parted with till the mystery was cleared up.

'Miss Lydney has sent for you to know if you can explain to her the trick of these tables,' said Hallaton. 'It is quite evident that they contain some secret compartment, of which she is ignorant. I can hardly say why, chiefly because you were an old friend of Mr. Mercer's, I think, but it struck me you might understand them.'

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'No, no,' was the reply. 'Old Joe never told me nothing. He treated me very badly at last, as you may remember, Sir Frederick.'

'The thing lies in a nutshell,' was the cool reply. 'If you can't help us, or won't help us, I shall recommend Miss Lydney to send for the nearest carpenter, and have these tables broken up under her own eyes.'

For two or three minutes Tootell remained silent, during which pause Mary re-entered the room. Rapidly running matters over in his own mind, Tootell saw at o[illegible] that whatever discovery was to be made would now in[illegible]itably take place. His curiosity impelled him to be present at it. He therefore replied—

'I shall be very glad to give any help I can. May I look at the tables?'

'Certainly,' said Mary.

After examining the brass inlaid pattern attentively for a little, Tootell observed—

'These are not quite the same pattern, but they are very like a pair that I bought not long ago, and which originally belonged to the Old Dragon ball-room. I fancy the trick is the same. You see,' he continued oracularly, 'that whereas on this table the brass scroll-work is all the same pattern, in the other it differs slightly, and if you will observe closely you will see that this boss, instead of being quite round like the others, is of a slightly oval shape. Pull the drawer quite out, press the boss I pointed out, and you will find the front of a small compartment behind the drawer fall down.'

It was difficult to say which of the three was [illegible]t excited. Quick as thought Mary pulled out the drawer, Tootell pressed the spring, and the baronet, putting in his hand, cried out—

'He's right. There's a cavity here, just such a place as would be used to deposit important papers.'

Mary held her breath and gazed anxiously at Sir Frederick. Suddenly his face fell, and in tones of [illegible] disappointment he exclaimed, 'There's nothing whatever in it.'

'Exactly the same in my case,' cried Tootell.

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'You also found nothing, Mr. Tootell?' said Mary. 'Where did you get them?'

'I bought them of Abrams, the dealer,' was the brief reply, 'and a precious lot he made me pay for them,' and then, well-nigh as crestfallen as his companions, Mr. Tootell declared investigation of the other table useless and took his departure.

CHAPTER XLIV

BRENT'S STORY

'A GREAT disappointment, no doubt, Miss Lydney,' said Sir Frederick, 'but bear in mind that, though Mercer said he knew where the papers were, he never hinted they were in those tables, nor gave any reason to suppose that they were at the Old Dragon at all. We know that these securities exist, and all we can say is they *must* be found.'

'You have been very kind, Sir Frederick,' said the young lady, with a bow of dismissal, 'but there is no more to be done except say good-bye,' and after a moment's hesitation she extended her hand.

Hallaton took it, and if he pressed it a little more closely than the terms of their compact quite warranted, it was hardly to be wondered.

Mary's face flushed slightly, but she did not trust herself with further speech, and Hallaton rather sadly left the room.

He told himself as he walked away it was only what he expected, but that was not quite the truth. He had hoped that Mary would have shown a little more warmth in her manner, and not adhered so rigidly to the line of conduct she had laid down, while she, poor girl, was even then blaming herself for having shaken hands with him.

'There's nothing more to be done here,' said Sir Frederick to himself. 'I'll go up to London by the next

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train, catch hold of Chives, and through him see if Sam Mercer can't be induced to worm this secret out of his father.'

It is an idle time with Sam Mercer. The racing of the year is over, and the dead season of the turf has commenced. In these days of post-betting there is little for the bookmaker to do during the recess, and an energetic, pushing man like Sam often grumbles at the enforced lull in his labours, and wishes he had lived in the good old times when speculation on the Derby went on all the winter. Sam Mercer, sitting in his comfortable lodgings in Bloomsbury, is lost in thought, and, after his manner when giving anything his grave consideration, is smoking furiously.

'It fairly beats me,' said the bookmaker to himself, 'what on earth he can want to see me about. Of course I recollect Brent, and used to see him now and again at the Dragon when I went down to look at the old folks, and always wondered what in the name of common sense he was doing there. However, all that was explained when what the old 'un took the inn for came out. The poor beggar says he's ill, and I dare say is hard up. Wants to borrow a few dollars, I reckon. Well, I'll go and see him, anyhow. Not much of weather this for invalids,' continued Sam, as he gazed out at the gloomy November day.

Having enveloped himself in an ulster, Sam lit a fresh cigar, just, as he said, to keep the fog out, and strode manfully away to the address given him at Islington. Brent's abode gave no indication of the poverty which the bookmaker had anticipated. On the contrary, if not palatially, Mr. Brent was very comfortably housed. The neat maidservant who opened the door informed Sam that her master was at home, and, without further demur, ushered him into a well-furnished room on the first floor, where, stretched on a luxurious-looking sofa, was the man he sought. Nothing about the room that gave the idea of poverty or want. On the contrary, it was just such a cosy den as a well-to-do bachelor would be likely to inhabit.

'Very kind of you to come, Mercer,' said the invalid, half-raising himself from the couch. 'You will excuse my

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getting up to talk to you; but I really am ill, and the slightest exertion seems to bring the confounded cough on.

'Well, you don't look very chipper,' replied the bookmaker. 'It's no use fooling you on that point; you'll have to lie by and take care of yourself this winter. I'm sorry to find you so ill. If there's anything I can do for you I'll do it; but I'm not going to find any money for such games as you and the old 'un carried on at the Dragon.'

'No fear,' said the other; 'this is my own house, and I've plenty of coin to last my time. I'm a dying man, and shall never last the winter through.'

'Nonsense!' replied Sam, cheerily; 'you'll not "hand in your checks" for many a year yet.'

'We won't argue about it,' replied the other, wearily; 'a man in a galloping consumption who expects to pull through is a fool. However, I've got one or two things to put straight before I go, and I want you to help me. First of all, do you know who I am?'

'Well,' said Sam, 'if your name is not Brent, I certainly don't.'

'I have gone under that name and many others since I lost my own thirty years ago. I am Richard Lydney, a brother of the banker at Exmouth.'

'Never heard of you; never knew he had one.'

'It was before you can remember, no doubt; but do you mean to say that you never heard of the robbery at Lydney's Bank?'

'Only in this way,' replied the bookmaker; 'when your brother was knocked out last year I did see in the papers that the abstraction of a lot of securities some time before was supposed to be the cause of his embarrassment. I suppose it was you that took them? and all I can say is, if you did, you played it pretty low on your brother.'

'I did not take them,' rejoined Brent, or, to give him his right name, Richard Lydney; 'but I got the credit of doing so, and should have found it impossible to prove my innocence if I had been taken.'

'Well,' said Sam, 'I don't see what's to be gained by your proving your innocence at this time of day: an un-

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pleasant thing for the family to have this old scandal revived.'

'But I can't prove my innocence,' said Richard slowly.

'Then,' rejoined Mercer, 'I can't see any cause for you to open your mouth.'

'Yes there is,' replied the sick man, dropping his voice almost to an eager whisper, 'I've got the securities.'

'No? Have you though; then there's a chance of putting everything all straight again. There's a particular friend of mine, Captain Chives, is just raising Cain about those securities. The only thing beats me is why the dickens you didn't hand them over to your brother long ago. They say down in the old country that he'd have settled all right enough if he had only had those documents.'

'Because, man, I hadn't got them; it wasn't for years afterwards I came to know the man who took them, and I only found them in the drawer of a table in the old ball-room about a fortnight before the smash came at the Dragon. I didn't know how hardly pressed my brother was, still I meant to restore them before I left, but thanks to that blundering fool Tootell, as you know, we had to clear out at short notice, and all I could do was to bring the papers along with me. How they got into that table in the old ball-room I haven't the faintest idea. I found them by the veriest accident. I was looking for an odd scrap of paper to light a pipe.'

'Still,' said Sam, 'you must have seen your brother's trouble in the papers; surely seen that his dollar shop had got the shutters up.'

'Not until it was too late to be of any good. In the first place the hue and cry after us was pretty hot, and I was too busy taking care of myself to give those papers a thought.'

'Well, if you like to entrust those papers to me, I'll see they get into Mr. Lydney's hands all right. I should like to ask you one question—if you didn't commit that robbery, what made you run away from Exmouth?'

'Well,' replied Richard Lydney, 'that's a long story. I was a young fellow, and a clerk in the bank at that time, a mere boy. I had rooms at the bank, and slept there.

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No wonder I fell into the follies of youth. I was in debt, and, worse still, I was entangled with a young woman. Polly Windsor was your mother's youngest sister, a very good-looking, imperious girl, about five years older than myself. It was her whim to do pretty much the same as her niece did years afterwards. She wanted to marry a gentleman. She was a good bit older, and her will much stronger than mine, and I verily believe she'd have carried her point if I hadn't fled. She's dead and gone now, poor thing, but when she set her mind upon a thing she was very hard to say no to. I let myself out of the bank in the early morning, and in my anxiety not to disturb the porter, who slept on the ground floor, I left the front door ajar. Two or three days afterwards I saw the account of the robbery in the papers, with the addenda :—"We regret to say that one of the family has absconded, which, sad to say, indicates his being probably concerned in it." What was I to do? It was useless for me to return and assert my innocence. I could give no explanation whatever of the robbery. I could not well explain why I had bolted from Exmouth, and I had excellent reasons for not wishing to return to it. I kept silence, and have been consequently branded as the perpetrator of the bank robbery ever since.'

'Now, I should like to ask you one other question. What on earth possessed you to let the governor in for a speculation like that?'

'He never made so much money in a short time in his life,' exclaimed Richard vehemently. 'That Old Dragon Inn was just made to work a plant of that kind in, and if it hadn't been for that idiot Tootell we should have made our fortunes, and run no risk whatever. I've been at it all my life, you see, and made a deal of money at the game.'

'Been at it all your life,' said the bookmaker. 'Mean to say you've been a scientific smuggler of the new school all your time?'

Lydney nodded assent. 'You see the way of it was this. When I came to town I had to earn a living. The only thing I was fit for was a clerkship, and pretty hard work I had to find that. At last I was taken in on trial in a big distillery, in the book-keeping department, and I

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did so well that I was taken on permanently. The whole process of distillation interested me extremely, and, though I had nothing to do with that part of the business, I spent a good deal of my spare time watching the men at their work, and by degrees got to understand the somewhat complicated operation tolerably well. An unexpected vacancy occurring amongst the overseers in the practical part of the establishment, I begged to be transferred to it from the office, and, after some little hesitation on the part of my employers, obtained it. I hated the drudgery of the office stool, but liked my new work excessively, and very soon became proficient in it, Then came the old story. Bah! you can guess it without my telling you. A young fellow about London, I got into bad company. We all know what that means. Festive hours, quickly followed by debt, difficulties, and hours very much the other way on. I became so irregular in my attendance at business that after one or two sharp reprimands I got the sack. Now, amongst the men employed under me in the distillery was a man a good bit older than myself, and a first-rate hand; so clever a man at his work that I often wondered he wasn't holding a higher position. However, I soon learnt that though there was nothing against him he had the reputation of being so uncommon shifty that his employers dared not trust him in any post of responsibility. "A first-class hand, but, bless your soul," said one of my brother superintendents, "that chap would levy a heavy toll on every vat if he had the chance." Of course this fellow knew I'd been kicked out of the firm, and, though it never struck me at the time, must have been keeping a sharp eye on me for some weeks past. Well, his chance had come now. If I had been in difficulties beforehand, you may be sure being kicked out of a situation wasn't likely to mend matters.'

'Not much,' remarked Sam.

'No,' rejoined Lydney, 'but this fellow I've been speaking of quickly found me out, and showed me how I could make a good bit of money without any risk to speak of, if I didn't mind going in for a little free trading; then he explained to me how for some little time he had been doing a little illicit distillation on his own account, and

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said, 'I've made a tidy bit of money at it, considering the very small scale upon which I've been able to work it. You see I'm at the distillery most of my time, and you know when the thing is on the run it wants watching night and day, and the one or two pals I've got in it with me are a long way off first-class hands. Now you are, Brent, and if you'll come in with me we'll extend the business, and as soon as I've got a little more capital I'll chuck the old shop, and we'll go in for it on a big scale."'

'The bargain was struck; for years he and I worked together, and in spite of being perpetually chivied by the revenue officers, and often having to abandon all our plant, still we made a good bit of money, and were never caught. However, three years ago he died, and I made up my mind to retire from business, when I thought I would take a run down to Exmouth and look at the old place once more. There was no chance of anyone recognising me after all those years, and the only people I made myself known to during the time I stayed were the Mercers. I wanted to hear as much as I could about my own family, you see. Now, while I was there, the old Dragon Inn was advertised to let, and, I need scarcely add, as a boy I'd known the house well. Mercer told me it had been shut up as an inn for years. Suddenly the thought flashed across me—what a magnificent place it would be in which to establish a private distillery on a good-sized scale. I knew all the old legends about the vaults beneath the ball-room, and so on. I would persuade Joe to join me, and in the old smuggling phrase, "run one last cargo." The re-opening of the old inn would, I felt sure, attract no custom, and be a capital blind to our real calling. Your father assented, took the inn, and you know the rest.'

'It's a monstrous queer story,' said the bookmaker. 'I reckon you did pretty well over that last cargo?'

'We did; and a few months more we should have finished, and the old Dragon would have been in the market again; and now, Mr. Mercer, you must go. I can't talk any more, and must try and get some sleep.'

'And about those securities?'

'They're all safe. Come and see me again about them, but remember, I'll not hand them over to either Captain

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Chives or any of your family. There, I can't talk any more, but I've good reasons of my own for what I say. I'll give them up only to my brother or his daughter. Now, please, give me a little of that brandy and water. Thanks,' he continued, as he took the tumbler from Mercer's hand. 'Once more, good-bye. Come and see me again in a day or two's time.'

The bookmaker pressed his hand, and then quietly descending the stairs, let himself out into the street.

'It's a queer story,' muttered Sam to himself. 'I wonder why he should mistrust all of us; and how the devil did those papers get into a table-drawer in the old ball-room? Who put 'em there, and why did he do it?' And this problem puzzled Sam Mercer all his homeward way.

CHAPTER XLV

A DEATH-BED SUMMONS

THE day after his arrival in town Hallaton was thrown into a state of great excitement by the arrival of Chives in breathless haste.

'Hurrah, Fred!' he cried, 'it's all right. I've just received a letter from Sam Mercer to say the securities are all safe. He had a long talk yesterday with the man who has them, and is to see him again in a day or two, when I'm to hear from him again; but the fellow who has them says he'll only give them up to either Mr. or Miss Lydney in person, and Sam says that he thinks he means sticking to that. However, that won't much matter so long as they get them.'

'No,' replied the other; 'that is the main point.'

'Why, it's the only point I should think,' replied Chives.

'Yes, of course it is,' replied Fred hastily, but for all that he could not help thinking how he should have liked to have given those papers to Mary Lydney with his own hand.

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'Well, it's a comfort to know it's all right,' said Chives; 'there's nothing more to be done but wait patiently till we hear again from Sam, and then I suppose Mr. Lydney will have to come up about it. There; that's all I have to say. I see you're busy at your writing table. Property has its obligations, we are told, and I suppose an extensive correspondence is one of them. I'm only sorry I don't see any prospect of my being troubled in that way at present. Come and lunch with me at the "Flags;"' and then the light-hearted artilleryman darted downstairs and jumped into the hansom he had in waiting.

The next morning's post brought Mary Lydney a letter which apprised her that the possessor of the securities was discovered, and that he professed himself perfectly willing to surrender them, but only into the hands of Mr. or Miss Lydney. The missive was couched in perfectly business terms, concluding with an inquiry as to whether Mr. Lydney would be well enough to travel up to town within the course of a week. That the holder of the papers was the long-lost Richard Lydney, Hallaton was not aware, for Mercer had thought it more judicious to keep that part of the matter to himself. On thinking over it, the bookmaker had seen no necessity for disclosing that fact. Indeed, until he had again seen the *soi-disant* Brent, he did not know whether he would wish it, and decided to keep his own lips closed on the subject.

The news plunged Mary into a state of feverish excitement. The idea of clearing her father's name she had begun to think was a hope never likely to be accomplished. When that momentary prospect of success had been dissipated by the failure to find the securities in the table, she slowly arrived at the conclusion that though old Mercer had spoken in good faith, yet his knowledge had come too late. She looked upon it that they perhaps had been there, but had been removed, in all probability previous to the sale at the Dragon. However, one thing was clear; it was no use mentioning it to her father at present, and in her own opinion when the time came it would be utterly impossible for him to proceed to London on such an errand. That must be for Dr. Meadows to decide, and it would be time enough to ask his opinion when she heard again.

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Sam Mercer only allowed two days to intervene before he once more wended his way out to Islington. He found Richard Lydney decidedly weaker than when he had last seen him ; in fact, there could be no doubt that the man was in the last stage of a galloping consumption, and though its victims sometimes linger for months, yet the bookmaker did not think it would be so in this case. Lydney was very pleased to see his visitor, and assured him, in reply to his inquiries, that he had everything he wanted, most attentive servants, and the best of medical advice.

'But that last is all bosh,' he added. 'All the doctors in London couldn't save me. I've had a rickety chest for a long time, and what between the worry of the cough, and this terrible feeling of weakness, I shall not be sorry when it's all over. I told you the other day I would give you my reasons for not handing those securities to anyone except my own people. I believe you to be straight, although I don't know much about you, but blood's thicker than water, and you're a Mercer. Now, your father was devoted to your sister, and it's only fair to suppose that you are the same. I had the opportunity of knowing Miss Mercer well, and you must excuse my saying that she had an iron will and a violent temper.'

'Yes ; Sarah liked to carry things with a high hand, and was apt to get wrathy if she didn't get her own way,' assented Sam.

'If there was one woman Miss Mercer hated it was Mary Lydney, and Miss Mercer was a good hater. If there was one woman she was madly jealous of it was my niece. I know she didn't get on well with her husband, and she was just the sort of woman who under those circumstances would nurse her jealousy for a lifetime. I have heard nothing about her for a long while. I don't know where she is ; but as I see by to-day's papers Hallaton *versus* Hallaton is down for hearing in the Divorce Court, I can fancy Lady Hallaton still cherishing the bitterest animosity to Mary, and that, had she the opportunity, those securities would never reach my brother's hands.'

'Well, Mr. Lydney,' said Sam Mercer, 'I can only say you know more than I do. What a jealous woman will do there's no telling. I can only say, if you had trusted me

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I should have handed the papers over to Mr. Lydney's friends, and Sarah would have known nothing about it. She's got herself into a devil of a scrape, no doubt; but I am her brother, and I intend to stand to her as far as I can.'

'Quite right,' rejoined Lydney. 'Then, as I don't think there's any time to spare, I'll write to my brother at once.'

'Better not do that, Mr. Lydney,' said the bookmaker, 'at all events until I've spoken to his friends. It's only delaying one post, but your brother has got securities on the brain—that's what he's got; and any allusion to these lost papers sends him well-nigh off his head. Where he heard it from I don't know, but Captain Chives told me the other day that at the time of the Dragon sale somebody wrote your brother word that the papers were in one of the tables in the old ball-room. Well, he attended that sale; bought, I believe, every table in the house; he didn't find 'em—'

'Of course not,' said the other. 'I did, and took them away with me.'

'Now, who put them there!'

'I told you before I've not the slightest idea. I know no more how they came there than you do.'

'But,' said the bookmaker suddenly, 'you surely said the other day you knew who committed the robbery.'

'Yes, that I do, at all events if the man himself is to be believed; he had no object to gain in admitting a crime to me that he had not committed. Goodness knows, he had committed enough robberies and had done enough imprisonment for them without inventing one, but I don't believe he even knew there was such a place as the Old Dragon.'

'Do you mind letting me know who he was and what was the story he told you?'

'He was a London burglar of the name of Creasy, and though he made some big hauls, could hardly be considered to have arrived at the top of his profession, inasmuch as he passed half his life in prison. He found me out, and as I was then engaged in the illicit business, and he knew it, I couldn't afford to quite turn my back on him just then, besides, as I say, he admitted that robbery, declared he could

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put his hands on those securities at any moment, and that I should have them back again. He seemed to have taken a queer fancy to me, and insisted on joining in our business in an inferior capacity. I bore with him because I hoped to recover those papers, but he was a marked man with the police, and a clumsy beggar to boot, and wound up by bringing the excise officers about our ears, and our escaping only by the skin of our teeth. Shortly afterwards he was caught red-handed in his own more special occupation, and retired from public life for five years. When he came out the same thing took place again in every particular. While your father and I were engaged in that speculation at the Dragon I heard he was once more out of prison. I only hoped that he would not discover me for a few months, by which time the old inn would have been to let, myself abroad, and he again most likely in prison. That's all his story as far as I'm concerned. Whenever he was out of prison he dogged me like a sleuth-hound, and a foreign shore was the only escape from his assumed devotion to myself. I have since thought he looked forward to making me the go-between in the realising of those securities, if he really could have laid his hands upon them.'

'And what became of him?' asked the other.

'He was killed in a railway accident, so I saw in the papers.'

'Reckon you're right,' said Sam. 'A cuss of that sort meant you to pay for his society in some shape. Now, Mr. Lydney, I'm going to wish you good-bye. You'll see me tomorrow, and by that time I shall have just talked things over with your brother's friends, who will tell me whether it's best to write to him or to Miss Lydney. They will do it, but do it yourself as well, and then there will be no mistake about it. Now, once more, good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Richard Lydney, as he pressed Mercer's hand. 'Bear in mind there's no time to be lost. I should like to put things right before I go, and say good-bye to my brother.'

'He's right,' muttered Sam to himself, as he descended the stairs. 'There is no time to be lost. It's getting very near the finish.'

The bookmaker lost no time in communicating with

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Chives, and that gentleman, who had previously talked the affair over with Hallaton, replied promptly, 'I've talked the whole matter over again with Mr. Lydney's friends in consequence of what you told me, and pointed out that it would be necessary for either Mr. or Miss Lydney to come to town themselves, and they have no hesitation in saying that the communication had better be made to Miss Lydney. Her father's health is so precarious, and any allusion to the lost securities throws him into such a state of excitement, that the subject is strictly tabooed.'

Sam Mercer was thoroughly acquainted through his friend, Dr. Nicholl, of the banker's extraordinary conduct at the Dragon sale, but he knew what nobody else did—that Mr. Lydney was summoned besides to say good-bye to that brother who had disappeared years ago, and over whose name the stigma of robbery still rested. It was absolutely necessary that he should come if he could, but that the excitement would be probably considerably more than his friends expected, was plain enough to Sam. Sam in his profession was accustomed to see men under a heavy strain of that kind, and knew very well that in the case of weak health it was dangerous.

'Hold on a bit, Captain Chives,' he said. 'I want to cipher this out. Miss Lydney is no doubt the person to write to. She will have a talk with her father's doctor before she starts. Will you deliver this message to her? Write it down, it's of consequence, and I've only my own judgment to go upon. Say it's of the greatest importance that Mr. Lydney should see the whole of those papers himself, if it's in any way possible, but the interview will cause him great excitement. There's no objection to Miss Lydney being present, nor any medical man she chooses within call, but it's of great consequence Mr. Lydney should see this man himself. 'There,' concluded the bookmaker, as Chives finished writing, 'that's all I've got to say, except that the sooner they're in town the better, as it is a race between life and death I'm afraid.'

Chives returned to his principal, considerably impressed by Sam Mercer's warning, and Hallaton lost no time in writing to Mary, telling her to come as quickly as possible, and impressing upon her that after Dr. Meadows had read

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that message, if he gave permission, it was very desirable that Mr. Lydney should come too. If she would telegraph what accommodation she required he would see that rooms were ready for them.

Clubland at this time was in a state of much babble about the announcement of the case of Hallaton *versus* Hallaton, and the rumour, well founded, as we know, that Lady Hallaton and the missing Lady Wrensley were one and the same person—in short, that the Hallaton Divorce case means the explanation of the Wrensley mystery.

CHAPTER XLVI

AFTER THIRTY YEARS

MARY is quite prepared for her summons, and at once proceeds to consult Dr. Meadows with regard to her father. He has been considerably better and quieter the last few days, but the doctor shakes his head rather gravely at the idea of the proposed journey. He reads the message over again and again. He is completely Mary's confidant, and knows the whole story as far as she can tell it.

'No,' he said gravely, at length. 'I know all the particulars of the case, mind, and this message tells me more than you. I don't want to see that letter, it would not help me if I did; it is quite probable the writer doesn't in the least understand the meaning of the message he has been earnestly bid to send.'

'I can't say for certain,' replied Mary, 'but suppose it comes from one of the Mercers, either the father or the son.'

'The son, I should think, from the wording of it,' replied Dr. Meadows. 'The sender of that message, when he talks of your father having great excitement to bear, and taking the advice of his medical man before risking the journey, had "heart" in his mind. Your father, I'm glad to say, has no organic disease whatever. It is his head I am always afraid of. He's tolerably well just now, and if I am right in the vague idea that has come into my mind,

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I think he ought to risk this interview. It may upset him a bit for a time, but as soon as he has quieted down he'll be a better and a happier man, in my judgment, than he has been since his misfortunes.'

So it was decided that Mr. Lydney was to undertake the journey. Mary telegraphed to Hallaton to secure them rooms, and the next afternoon saw them comfortably installed at a quiet hotel in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park.

The banker had at first been extremely puzzled as to the cause of this journey to town, but Dr. Meadows had declared that it was necessary Miss Lydney should see a London physician of his recommending. He did not believe there was anything the matter, but for his own satisfaction he preferred to have a second opinion. Mary was rather amused at finding that she was to play the part of an invalid, and that her father was supposed to be going up to town in charge of her. Doctor Meadows saw them off by the train, and as he shook hands with Mary said, 'Don't be afraid, my dear young lady; you will bring back the lost papers, and have their whole history cleared up with a vengeance, or I'm much mistaken.'

At the hotel Mary found a letter from Hallaton awaiting her, in which he informed her that a carriage would call for them at eleven o'clock the next morning, and that she and her father had better drive out to the address mentioned below and ask for Mr. Brent; that the papers would be there restored to her, and that he trusted Mr. Lydney would not be over-excited by the transaction. Mary duly followed the directions contained in her letter, and, accompanied by her father, stepped into the carriage which arrived for them next morning, and drove off to Mr. Brent's. The door was opened for them by Sam Mercer, who, touching his hat to Mr. Lydney, said, 'I beg your pardon, sir, neither you nor Miss Lydney know me, though I know you by sight. My name is Sam Mercer; the gentleman who has unexpectedly come into possession of some of your property is upstairs waiting to restore it. I have only to say that I've nothing more to do with it, but shall be waiting here in case I'm wanted. Show the lady and gentleman right up, Susan.'

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The banker trembled from head to foot; he said nothing, looked merely for a moment at Sam, and then followed their conductress upstairs. As they entered the room the occupant half-rose from the sofa, and said, 'Pray be seated; I am too ill to get up and welcome you, but I have much to say to you, and very little time to say it.'

A mazed look came over Mr. Lydney's face, as that of a man troubled with some recollection of former years, and he gazed earnestly at the speaker.

'John, don't you know me? years have changed me, and illness still more so, but still you might recollect your only brother!'

'Good heavens, Richard!' exclaimed the banker, and in a moment he had started to his feet, and was clasping his brother's hand affectionately, while his memory travelled back to years, years ago, when he was a young man just taken into the bank, and Richard a boy at school, and his mother's spoilt darling.

For some moments not a word was spoken; both men were evidently deeply moved, while Mary was so bewildered that she forgot for the minute to fear the excitement for her father. She had no idea that he had ever had a brother, and yet that wasted wreck stretched upon the sofa and clasping his hand he had just acknowledged to be such. She had known that the robbery at the bank had been attributed to a relation, but she had never dreamt of its being one so near akin. It was Richard Lydney who first broke the silence.

'I have sent for you, John,' he said at last, in a low voice, 'to say good-bye, and to give you the word of a dying man that I am innocent of the crime laid to my charge. The securities I was falsely accused of stealing fell quite accidentally into my hands only a year ago. It is rather a long story, but I should like you to know it. It is the story of a wasted life, now drawing to its close,' and then Richard Lydney recapitulated the history of his adventures from the day he had fled from Exmouth up to the present time, 'and there,' he concluded, 'are those long-lost securities, the cause, John, of all your misfortunes, and the which I once more solemnly declare I never took away with me,' and as he spoke he pointed to the table,

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on which lay a bundle of papers. The banker had sat literally trembling with excitement during his brother's narration, and, absorbed though she had been in it, Mary had by this time recovered her self-possession, and was keeping a watchful eye upon her father.

As Richard Lydney finished, the banker sprang to his feet and exclaimed, 'And you found them in a drawer of one of the tables in the old ball-room? Extraordinary! Only just before the sale a poor fellow of the name of Johnson sent me a line from the hospital at Ditchford to say that they were there.'

'Sit down, papa,' said Mary, 'and try not to excite yourself more than you can help; excitement is so bad for him, Uncle Richard, and I am afraid it is equally bad for yourself.'

'So you are my niece, Mary,' said Richard Lydney. 'I have thought much of you, and have seen you on more than one occasion in Exmouth.'

'I think you had better stop speaking for a few minutes. It will be best for both of you;' but despite his daughter's exhortations the banker was far too excited about his brother's strange story to compose himself.

'Ah, Mary,' he exclaimed in tones of anguish, 'if I hadn't lost my head just when I wanted it, if we had only searched the tables thoroughly, Lydney and Son need never have stopped payment.'

'Be quiet, papa, please. I am sure you will, when I say it's bad for Uncle Richard.'

'Yes, keep as quiet as you can, John. The papers are all right, and there's no more to tell.'

'May I ask one question?' said Mary. 'How came you to discover the secret hiding-place in that table?'

'I know of no hiding-place,' rejoined her uncle. 'I found the papers, as I have said, in a drawer. It was not locked, and precisely like the drawer of any ordinary writing-table; but, John, I also have one question to ask. You say that a man of the name of Johnson sent you that message from the Ditchford Hospital. There was a man I've known for many years, no very reputable character, and therefore quite as likely to be travelling under the name of Johnson as not, who always assured me that he stole the

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papers and knew where they were. However, he was killed in a railway accident, I believe, and certainly never confided the secret to me.'

'It's the same man; it must be the same man,' exclaimed the banker excitedly. 'Called himself Johnson, and, God help me, Dick, I went up to Ditchford expecting to see you, only to find—a dead man whom I had never seen before. In my anxiety to get some clue to the missing deeds I telegraphed for an officer from Scotland Yard, who identified him as a well-known burglar, Creasy by name.'

'Then the scoundrel spoke the truth after all. I should like to have heard his version of the business.'

He left a long letter with the chaplain—a confession, I suppose I might say, since it was upon those grounds that the reverend gentlemen refused to give it up to anyone except the person to whom it was addressed, "Richard Brent, Esq." That's you, Dick, you know.'

'Yes,' replied the other. 'I'm curious to see that confession; it's a whim of mine. Mary get a pen and ink and just write a letter I'll dictate to you.'

At her uncle's dictation Mary penned a letter to the chaplain of the Ditchford Hospital, requesting him to give the bearer the confession addressed to Richard Brent, alias Richard Lydney, as testimony to the innocence of a dying man who wished to clear himself of a crime of which he had been wrongfully accused.

This letter Richard signed, and made Mary witness, and then said, 'Take the deeds, John; you will find them all right. I am too tired to talk more now; and I dare say you'll be all the better for lying down a bit yourself. Come and see me to-morrow, if you're well enough. At all events, Mary, I shall expect you. Leave me that note, and as you go downstairs ask them to tell Sam Mercer to come up and see me.'

They bid the sick man good-bye, and as they descended the stairs Sam came from a lower room into the hall. Mary gave her message, and as soon as Sam had seen them into their carriage, he turned back into the house and went up into Richard Lydney's room.

'Time the visit was over,' said the bookmaker gently.

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'Tell me what it is you want, and I'll do it, no fear, and then get some rest.'

Richard told him to read the letter and close it. 'Now,' he said, when the bookmaker had finished, 'I want you to go down to Ditchford with that letter by the earliest train, and to bring that confession back with you.'

'One word,' said Sam. 'You've trusted me all through this business, and found me ever honest. You'd better let me hand this over to Captain Chives. The chaplain will pay more attention to an officer in the army than he would to me. Clergymen of the Church of England don't think much of my calling.'

'Do as you think best, but remember I rely upon you.'

'And you may,' said the bookmaker; and dashing down the stairs he jumped into the cab which he had kept waiting in case of contingencies, and drove west as fast as, stimulated by the promise of an extra guerdon, the driver could take him.

He was fortunate enough to catch Chives just thinking of lunch, and no sooner did that gentleman awake to a sense of what was required of him than he was prompt in the extreme. An 'A B C' was sent for, consulted, and the very next train saw the artilleryman on his way to Ditchford.

CHAPTER XLVII

CREASY'S CONFESSION

ALTHOUGH Mr. Lydney had been greatly excited at finding that his brother was still alive, yet the recovery of the precious securities had so soothing an effect upon his mind that he did not suffer so much as it was feared he might. Mary was very anxious about him, but towards the evening he became more tranquil, and after passing a tolerably good night professed himself not only able but anxious to accompany his daughter to Islington.

'Poor Dick!' he said. 'What a miserable mistake his life has all been, and how little we have seen of each

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other. I suppose, poor fellow, I ought to have looked after him better, I was so many years his senior; but I was only just married, and I had no idea he was going to the bad. If he had only confided his troubles to me! As for his debts, no doubt they were such as I could easily have arranged. And as for his being entangled with Miss Windsor, he might have gone away just as easily with our knowledge instead of without it. If he had only had the sense to come back at once and declare his innocence of the robbery all would have been well, but he hadn't the courage to face it. Poor Dick! Ah, it'll all matter little to him in a few weeks now!'

Mary made no answer. She was wondering in her own mind whether the note she had written for her uncle yesterday had been successful, and whether the story of the missing papers from the time they left the safe in Exmouth to their discovery by her uncle in the ball-room of the Dragon was likely to be unravelled.

Chives had accomplished his errand successfully, after some slight demur on the part of the chaplain of the Ditchford Hospital. Producing Richard Lydney's note, he had at once unfolded his mission. The chaplain read the letter carefully, and having done that, remarked—

'This is your card, of course, Captain Chives? May I ask if you are acquainted with the writer of this note?'

'I neither know him nor its contents,' was the rejoinder. 'I was told that you were unwilling to part with the letter I am commissioned to bring back with me unless perfectly assured that it would fall into the hands of the man for whom it was intended.

'I was further told that that man was on his death-bed, and excessively anxious to have this letter. It was thought that my status as an officer in the army would be a guarantee to you that this application was *bonâ fide*, and I am quite willing to answer for the honesty of those who sent me. Further, I was told to say that if you will insist on delivering it with your own hands, it will do equally well, providing you are prepared to return with me to London by the next train.'

'Do you know, Mr. Lydney, the banker of Exmouth?' inquired the chaplain.

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'Certainly,' replied Chives.

'And Richard Lydney?'

'Never heard of him,' was the response.

'I should like to place this letter in the hands for which it was intended myself; but it would be extremely inconvenient for me to go to town to-night, and therefore, Captain Chives, I must entrust it to you. If you'll wait a couple of minutes I'll fetch it.'

This the reverend gentleman accordingly did, and in less than an hour Chives was speeding back to town with the letter in his breast-pocket. Through the medium of Sam Mercer Creasy's confession was speedily transferred to the house at Islington, and when Richard Lydney welcomed his brother and niece the next morning, he held the paper in his hand.

'I know, John, you believed my story yesterday, but it is a satisfaction to me to place a thorough confirmation of it in your hands. Read it.'

There were a few lines at the commencement to the effect that it had been written down by the chaplain at the earnest request of James Creasy, a criminal dying at Ditchford Hospital from injuries received in a railway accident. 'I have thought proper,' added the reverend gentleman, 'to clothe his confession in my own language, in preference to the mixture of argot and unconscious profanity in which it was couched:'—

'It is not worth saying much about myself, but I was a regular gutter-bred one, I was. Such as us haven't much of a chance in this world, and I wasn't the sort to break my heart in trying to get an honest living. I was pretty clever at pocket-picking as a child, and by the time I was twenty had begun to make a name for myself as a burglar.

(There was a note by the chaplain. N.B.—The miserable man seemed really to look back with pride upon his reputation). 'Well, I have broken into a many houses, and been into a many gaols—like others, our profession has its ups and downs—but what I am coming to is this: by the time I was about thirty years of age I had made things a little too hot for myself to make London and its neigbourhood pleasant as a residence, and determined to make a little business tour in the provinces, and after a bit found

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myself at Exmouth. There was a quiet inn about a mile from the town, at which I put up. It had been a swell place, I fancy, in its day, but it was on the down line when I knew it—been a big house of call, I heard, in the old smuggling days. However, it was a nice quiet house, with no inquisitive people about, and I thought I'd make it my headquarters for a bit, and see what was to be done in the neighbourhood. Well, they were pretty old-fashioned in their habits down there, and so were their locks and fastenings, when they happened to recollect to use 'em. Getting into a house down there for a swell London cracksman such as I was by that time was child's play, and I drove a very pretty trade. But people will talk, and after a little they raised such a hullabaloo about my visits that I determined to finish off with a very likely crib that I had marked down, and then quit the locality. I had worked the oracle, made a very good haul indeed, and was returning home through Exmouth in the early morning when I saw a young gentleman open the door of a house in the main street, look cautiously up and down, then come out, and with a bag in his hand walk quickly past me in the direction of the railway station. I had a good look at his face, for I was wondering at first whether he was in my own line, but no, he looked rather too much of a gentleman for that. I walked on, and as I passed the door that he had come out of, a little to my astonishment I saw that it belonged to the bank, and that he had left it ajar. Encouraged by my success, I determined, at all events, to have a look in. There was nobody about. I slipped on indiarubber overshoes, stepped inside the hall, put down my bag of plunder, and began to explore. I had not to go far before my practised eye discovered what I wanted—the safe. It was locked, of course, but the lock was of the old provincial pattern, and what was that to a top-sawyer like me, with the latest improvements in jemmies and skeleton keys in my pocket. There was risk, of course. I didn't know who slept on the premises. I didn't know whether that door was left open by accident or design—in the latter case that young man might return. I resolved to chance it, and in less than fifteen minutes I was inside that safe. As far as gold went there was not a great deal, and I wasn't quite

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such a fool as to take the notes of a country bank. But there were a lot of deeds and such-like, and for the return of these there is sometimes a big reward advertised and no questions asked; so a bundle of these I took, and then walked home to my quarters at the Dragon.

'The next day there was no end of a bobbery all over the place; if my previous exploits had interested the public the robbery at the bank had excited it to fever pitch. I soon found that to leave my present quarters would be to at once attract attention. Quiet though the people were, and indifferent to the proceedings of their lodgers, yet the recent robberies were being discussed at the bar and in the tap-room by the few customers who chanced to drop in. Most of my plunder I had already got away to town, especially such as was compromising. The most condemning things I had got about me were the papers I had taken from the bank. I was desperately afraid of being caught with them upon me. Nobody ever went into the old ball-room, and I resolved to hide them there in the drawer of an old table, and come back for them when the storm had blown over. In a few days I left, but was shortly after convicted of a robbery near London, for which I got five years' imprisonment. I have been in gaol half my life, and when I was out somehow I never seemed to have time to go down and fetch those papers; in fact, I don't think I should have bothered my head any more about them, only that they gave me a sort of hold over Brent, as he called himself, although I knew his real name to be Richard Lydney. I don't know how it was, I don't think he cared about me, but I had a curious fancy for him. He had had a robbery chalked down to him, you see, which I committed, and though he hadn't been "shopped" for it, still he had had to pay for it in his way. Last time I came out of prison I inquired about Brent, and for a long time couldn't make out what had become of him. At last I heard he was in the country down Devonshire way. I'd got a bit of money, so I thought I'd tog myself out respectable, and go down to Exmouth. There might be a bit of business to be done there, it might be that Brent had gone down there—scenes of his childhood, and all that sort of thing—and I might find out if those papers were still where I had put

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them. If I found 'em and Brent, I determined this time he should have them right off. Well, I got down there, found the Old Dragon Inn was still going, and was thinking about taking up my quarters there, when I was unluckily got hold of by an inquisitive old fool, whom I soon found knew the people who kept it, and was a daily visitor there. While I was thinking how to shake him off came the explosion, and I found Brent had been carrying on his old game again. Under pretence of curiosity to see the place, I did my best to search the old ball-room, but the excise officers kept too jealous a watch, and though allowed to see the house and the illicit still, I never was left a moment alone. Leaving Exmouth I got my gruel. The doctor tells me it's all up with me, and I can't live—and that's all I know about the papers, so help me heaven.

'I have sent word to Mr. Lydney, the banker of Exmouth, and I wish this paper to be given to Richard Lydney, alias Brent, if ever he makes inquiries about his old pal James Creasy, alias Johnson.'

The whole tale of the lost securities was now perfectly clear, and it was singular to reflect that if it had not been for the insatiable curiosity of the meddlesome Tootell those long-lost papers would have found their way back to Mr. Lydney's hands in time to save the bank of Lydney and Co.

CONCLUSION

THE case of Hallaton *versus* Hallaton comes into court at last, and if the scandal-mongers expected piquant revelations they were sadly disappointed. As Audley South said, 'Lady Wrensley was as great a fraud in the law courts as she had been in society.' Talk about an interesting trial, it was nothing but a most prosaic and everyday case of bigamy, rendered more so by the absence of the principal actors in the drama, with the exception of Sir Frederick Hallaton. The proceedings were of the baldest and briefest; there was no defence. It was proved in the most conclusive way that Sarah had no pretence whatever for supposing

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her husband to be dead, and that application to his lawyers would have at once assured her she was mistaken, even had she thought so, while Sir William's solicitors, instructed by their client, produced proof of the second bigamous marriage. The decision of the Court promised Sir Frederick his freedom as soon as the six months' delay imposed by law had expired.

Mary wrote a long description of the recovery of the papers to her old friend Dr. Meadows, and informed him that she and her father would remain in town some little time longer, as it was impossible to leave her uncle Richard, who was rapidly sinking. Though she had never heard of this relation, her father told her that Dr. Meadows would remember him and all the circumstances of his disappearance. As for Sir Frederick, she had seen nothing of him since she had been in London, though the papers had informed her of the results of Hallaton *versus* Hallaton. It would make little difference to her, she thought, but she was glad that he was released from that infamous woman.

Their stay in London, however, soon came to an end, and in three weeks Richard Lydney had closed his misguided career, and was laid quietly in his grave, with his brother, niece, and Sam Mercer as mourners. He left, to the banker's surprise, some seven or eight thousand pounds behind him, all of which, with the exception of a handsome legacy to Sam Mercer, was bequeathed to Mary. The last sad duties performed, Mr. Lydney was anxious to hurry back to Exmouth with the precious papers, and re-establish himself in the eyes of all his friends and acquaintances. Just before leaving town Mary got a note from Sir Frederick, in which he congratulated her on the satisfactory result of her visit to London, further informed her that he was going abroad for some time, and begged her not to forget what he had said the last time he saw her.

. . . . . .

Wandering up and down on the Continent, well-known in the Riviera, and notably as a daring and successful player at Monte Carlo, is a bold, handsome woman, always strikingly dressed, and who attracts much attention whenever she appears. She is generally surrounded by a train

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of admirers, but ladies, though inquisitive as to who she may be, and unable to refrain from admiration of her insolent beauty and magnificent toilettes, manifest no desire to make her acquaintance. It is whispered that she is a woman with a history, and certain it is that those few of her own sex she consorts with can also lay claim to that somewhat dubious distinction. Rumour says that she was once a star in the London world, and is now one of those lost Pleiades upon whom Society has closed the gates of Paradise. Although amply provided for—Sir William behaved to the guilty woman with chivalrous liberality—Sarah, or Madame Mercier, as she now calls herself, is always in sore straits for money. She has contracted habits of unbridled extravagance, and to be numbered among the train of her admirers is a heavy tax upon any man not possessed of liberal resources. Lover she has none. Except for that passing caprice for Fred Hallaton, Sarah has never known what it is to feel a *tendresse* for any man. A coquette to the tips of her fingers, she is a very adept in the taxation of those who succumb to her fascinations. As one who had worn her chains for a season remarked on recovering his freedom, 'She is a charming but devilish expensive acquaintance.'

Still Sarah, stiff upper lip as she might keep to the world, felt her downfall bitterly. There were women she encountered at times whom she had either snubbed or patronised in her days of splendour who avenged the slights of former times, and passed her with stony stare or contemptuous smile. Such episodes stung her haughty temper to madness; restlessly she moved from place to place seeking, like the fabled wanderer, that peace which in this world she would never attain. Quiet seclusion had no attraction for Sarah. She craved excitement, society was a necessity for her, and yet the averted looks of the women, and the bold homage of the men, were gall and wormwood to her. Play! Yes, Monaco gave zest to life, but fortunate as one may be at starting, the persistent gambler invariably finds the tables too much for him in the end, and what would be a comfortable income for anyone indulging persistently in *rouge et noir* defies calculation. It was after a very bad week at Monaco that Sarah came to the

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conclusion life was becoming very stale and unprofitable. She was a fool; she had lost every shilling she could lay her hands on. Stay; she had some valuable jewellery as yet—little difficulty about realising that in the last legitimate home of *rouge et noir* and *roulette*. She would have one last night at the tables, and recoup herself. The stimulant had become a necessity to her, and, sad to say, other stimulants as well. Never had she played bolder or with worse luck than she did that evening. It was soon over, and with a saucy smile, a gay laugh, and a declaration that she was utterly ruined, she accepted the invitation of one of her admirers to supper. Never had she appeared in wilder spirits than she did at that repast, and when her cavalier bade her good-night on the steps of her hotel, he little dreamt that it was good-night for aye, for ever.

Sarah Mercer was found the next morning apparently asleep in an arm-chair in the sitting-room, but the empty phial with the smell of choral still clasped in the stiffened fingers, told the last scene of that pitiful life. Two years after her flight from London, and Sarah's restless spirit was at peace.

Mr. Lydney's old friends rallied strongly around him on his return to Exmouth. Dr. Meadows proclaimed the whole story far and wide, and although the bank was never re-opened, all its liabilities were discharged, and the banker himself satisfactorily acquitted of intentional fraud.

As for Mary, hard though Sir Frederick pleaded, she resolutely declined to become his wife while Sarah lived. 'It may be a foolish prejudice, my darling. I cannot help it. I should never feel married to you while that woman lived. I shall never marry anyone else; but Fred, dear, don't think that I have any wish to hold you bound to me. You will be my own love as long as I live. You will find other girls who will laugh at my foolish fancies, and God grant you may be happy with one of them.'

However, Sir Frederick did not come across that young lady whom Mary had suggested might fill her place before Sarah's unexpected death effectually removed all Miss Lydney's objections.

Colonel Chives, though a frequent guest at Oaklands,

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still visits there unaccompanied. He delivered himself one night in the smoking-room as follows:—'I have lived a virtuous and prosperous life, have had a deal of fun in my time, unclouded by domestic afflictions, except in the case of the lamented decease of Fuss and Fidget, and except when, in spite of old Sam's counsels, the racing 'flies up and hits me in the eye' (meaning 'proves unsuccessful' in Chives's vernacular), have nothing to complain of, nor upon the whole, Master Fred, have you.'

'No, indeed, Dicky,' was the reply, 'I'm a very much more fortunate man than I deserve to be.'

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